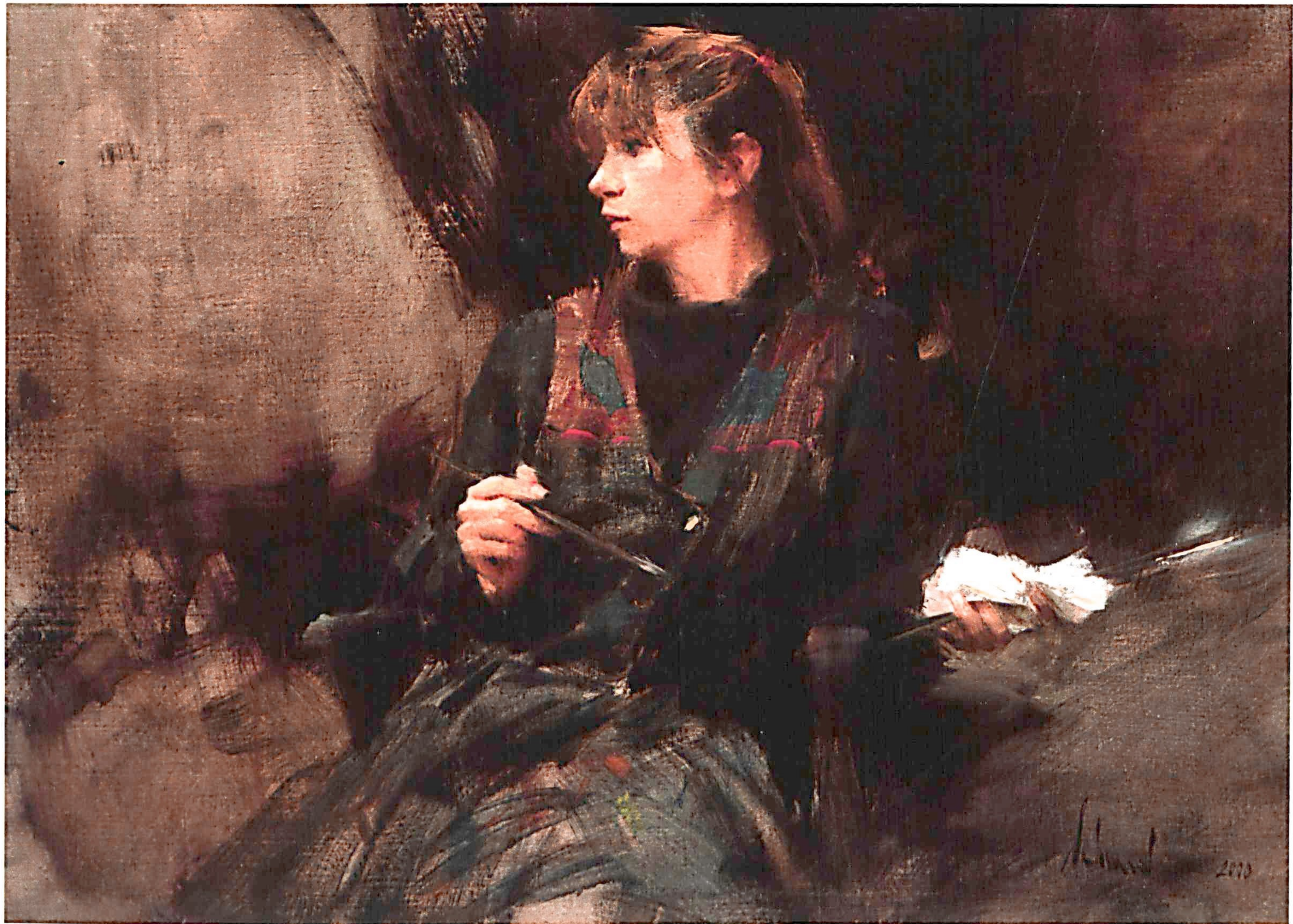


ALLA PRIMA II

Everything I Know About Painting—and More



By RICHARD SCHMID

With Katie Swatland

EXPANDED EDITION

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Everything I Know About Painting—and More

By RICHARD SCHMID

Alla Prima II is a direct response to the remarkable success of the earlier book, *Alla Prima*, which went into thirteen printings after it was published in 1998. This new volume includes all of the information contained in the original printings, and all material has been extensively revised for increased clarity. It has also been considerably expanded to provide a much broader frame of reference in each of the critical aspects of painting.

As with the original *Alla Prima*, this book offers to the artist and art lover alike the wisdom and technical savvy which comes from a classical education and a lifetime of painting and teaching. Writing as an acknowledged master, Richard gracefully leads his reader through the subtleties of painting theory and technique with refreshing directness and unmatched technical authority. With an emphasis on painting from life, he writes with warm humor about the joys and trials of being an artist. He brings to life the romance of Bravura painting and examines the mysteries of color in fascinating detail. A new view of design is offered, along with insights into the thinking of the great Masters. The virtuosity that painters strive for is presented as an attainable goal, but he also tells us what to do when everything goes wrong.

Above all Richard writes with deep affection to all who strive for self-expression, regardless of their level of skill. He shares his own struggle from art school to the present, and offers the things he has learned with the hope that his reader may enjoy the same journey of discovery.

Lavishly illustrated, *Alla Prima II* provides a unique overview of the rich historical background and underlying theoretical ideas of Direct painting, while examining in detail all of its technical problems and solutions. It also covers the full range of artistic subject matter and reveals the one thing a painter must know to capture it all.

328 pages. 262 color images.

Cover Painting: *NANCY PAINTING* (Second Version)
oil on canvas, 18 x 24

ALLA PRIMA II



EVERY ARTIST WAS FIRST AN AMATEUR.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson



DOOR COUNTY AFTERNOON gouache on paper, 5.5 x 11, Wisconsin, 1988

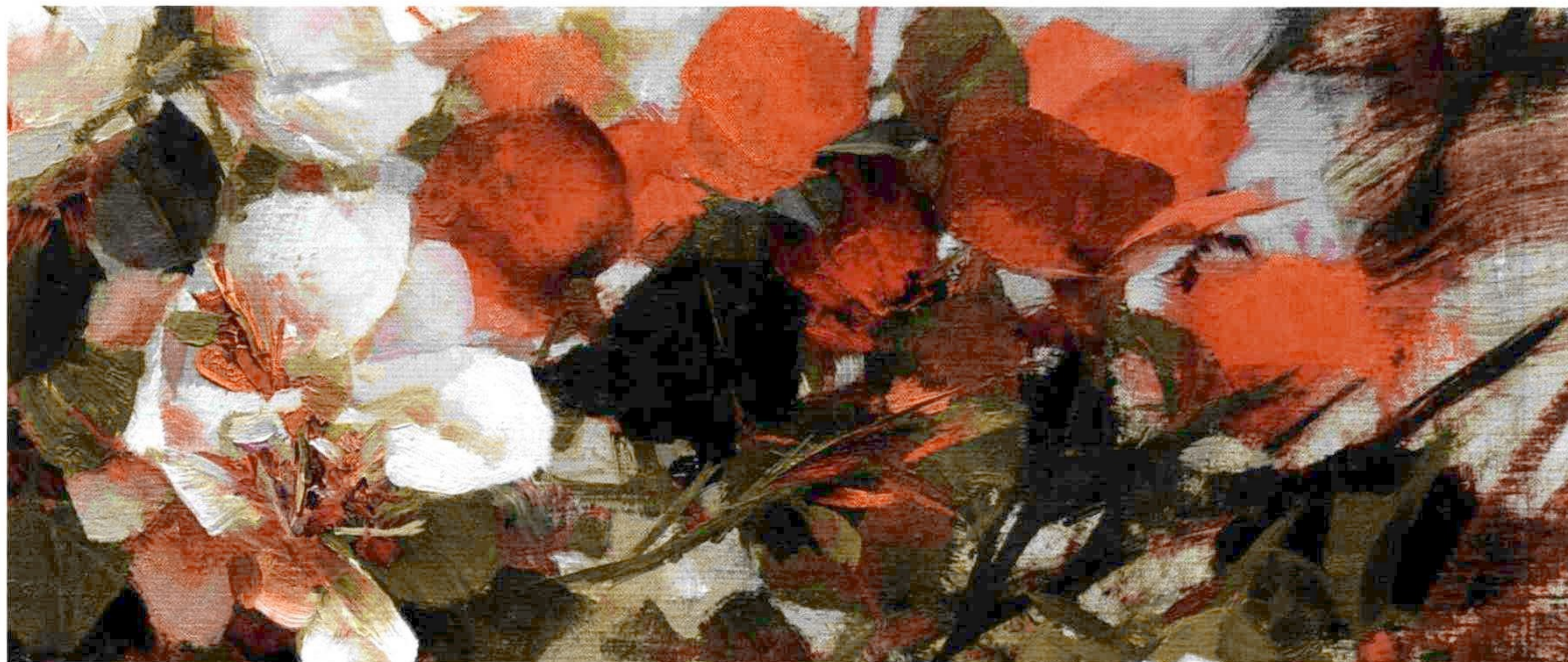
Shown here from left to right are Rose Frantzen, Scott Burdick, and Nancy Guzik, during their landscape painting debut in 1987. We spent a week together painting the cherry orchards and Lake Michigan shoreline on the tranquil Green Bay peninsula of Wisconsin. Pity I didn't show my friends from the front. After days of rain, black flies, twisted ankles, sunburn, and my critiques, their expressions were quite interesting. All have since developed superb outdoor painting skills.

ALLA PRIMA II

EVERYTHING I KNOW ABOUT PAINTING—AND MORE

By

RICHARD SCHMID



With

Katie Swatland

EXPANDED EDITION

STOVE PRAIRIE PRESS™

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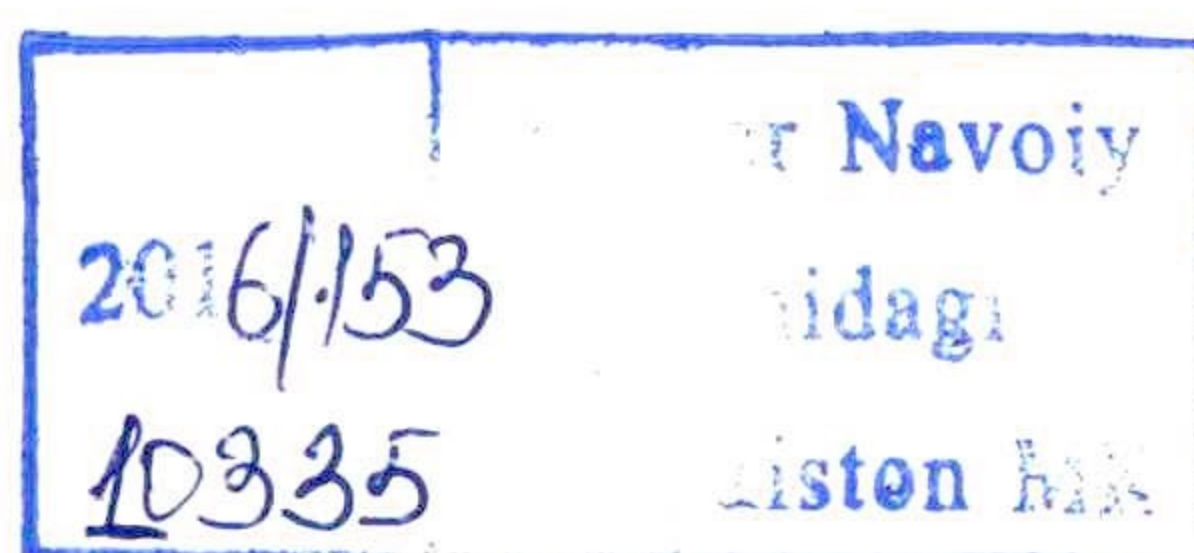
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expressed in inches, unless
otherwise noted.

Cover painting: *NANCY PAINTING* oil, 18 x 24, by Richard Schmid.

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FOR BILL MOSBY

When I was much younger I had some truly gifted teachers. The most extraordinary of them was a man named William H. Mosby, who taught for many years at the American Academy of Art in Chicago. It was there that I had the remarkable good fortune of receiving a structured classical education in painting from him. "Bill" Mosby in turn received his primary training prior to World War II at the Belgian Royal Academy in Brussels, and later at the Superior Institute in Antwerp. His teachers were contemporaries of such luminaries as Monet, Degas, Zorn, Sargent, Sorolla, Mancini, Serov, and the rest of that group, along with the Naturalists, the Impressionists and others. The pure skill which abounded in most of that generation was grounded on seven centuries of accumulated information—knowledge which by then had reached an astonishing level of sophistication. Mosby had a direct access to that world of art and he generously shared what he learned with me. In many respects, this is his book as much as mine.



FALLEN PINE oil on canvas, 12 x 16, Stove Prairie, Colorado, 1991

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ARPEGGIOS oil on canvas, 15 x 22, 2011

PREFACE TO THIS EDITION

I am most sincerely indebted to all of you who have taken time to write me over the years and comment on my first edition of *Alla Prima*. Your response has been gratifying beyond my expectations. With your many letters and excellent questions, you have expressed to me your appetite for knowledge and learning, not only about painting itself, but also about the deeply beautiful philosophical ideas I believe should underlie all of the arts. Much of what has been added to this new edition is the direct result of your thoughtful observations and suggestions.

Alla Prima was first published in 1998 when printing was still a film-to-press process. The book was well received and went into thirteen printings. However, in the years since 1998, the technology of printing changed dramatically, and today as in many other fields, it's all about computers. Therefore, to continue publication of *Alla Prima*, I have converted my book into a digital format to meet current industry methods.

While this transformation was a sizable effort over several years, it has turned out to be a great opportunity to fine-tune and greatly expand what was already a good thing. With the invaluable assistance of Katie Swatland, it was possible to not only make the digital conversion, but to add considerably to the quantity and quality of the pictures and text. With this new edition, now called *Alla Prima II*, we were able to restore and enhance all images to a state of being a near-perfect match of my paintings. All that is lacking here now is the sweet aroma of my oil paints.

Since this book is an updated and greatly extended version of the original *Alla Prima*, I have retained the look and general format of the earlier printings. However, I have added abundantly to the text of each original chapter and created new sections within chapters. Included as well are many helpful new images and step-by-step painting sequences. I've also provided a list of my favorite art books, and comprehensive indexes for convenience.

Again, I thank all who have thoughtfully expressed themselves to me over the years, especially those who have incorporated into their own art some of the sound principles I offered in *Alla Prima*. Please bear in mind that my motive in sharing this data is not to convert anyone to a particular way or school of painting, particularly mine. After all, I have always stubbornly resisted all who tried to steer *me* onto what they thought was a proper path. Whatever way you choose, I hope it is one of excellence and fidelity to what you want. My books are mainly about ideas that may help. I hope they may inspire as well.

What I present here is the technical knowledge, experience, and wisdom of countless artists and craftspersons—women and men who over many centuries exactly garnered and fashioned this information into virtuoso painting—one of the most beautiful and powerful mediums of creative expression ever conceived and brought to life.

As always, I wish you all possible joy and fulfillment in your art.

Richard Schmid
New Hampshire 2013



FAMILY DOLLS oil on canvas, 24 x 48, 1993



MY MOST SINCERE
GRATITUDE

TO

MY WIFE, NANCY GUZIK

KATIE SWATLAND

KRISTEN THIES

MY DAUGHTERS

DANIEL KEYS

STEPHEN STINEHOUR

HARRY L. OATES

SISTER MARY DAVID OSB

THOMAS PARKS

ROBERT RING

JOSEPH SEEWALD

WILLIAM AUST

and

my parents,

HAZEL VIRGINIA SCHMID

GEORGE JOSEPH SCHMID



GRETCHEN SKETCHING oil on canvas, 20 x 30, Battle Lake, Minnesota, 1985

INTRODUCTION TO THIS EDITION

This book is mostly about how I paint. I'd like those who look at my pictures to see what I see when I look at my subjects. At least that is my fond hope. I respectfully write with the assumption that your goal is similar—that you wish to be able to faithfully render what *you* see as a prerequisite to self-expression, or simply paint for the sheer enjoyment of creating (I do both). Occasionally, a picture might turn out well by accident, or luck, or sheer effort, but don't count on it. If you wish to make certain your painting will succeed, a minimum of **three** things must come from you—**and only you**. The first thing is knowing **why** you want to paint your subject, the second is an **analytical grasp** of what you see, and the third is the **skill** to control the process of painting. These three ideas underlie everything I share with you in these pages.

I prefer to work from life, so there is much about "Direct painting" throughout this book. Direct painting, also popularly called *Alla Prima* or *Au Premier Coup*, means painting directly from life, usually in one session. I believe it to be the ultimate in representational art because it is about actual human experience as it is happening. Consequently it demands the highest level of a painter's skill. Also, I write mostly from the standpoint of an oil painter. While I enjoy other mediums, I work mostly in oils and naturally express myself in those terms, but my message should make sense regardless of the materials you use. I also feel that changing my references from one medium to another would be confusing. In any case, the same visual elements (shapes of color or values and edges) are involved. The only difference is in the rendering.

I have tried to avoid rules of any kind. If some of my comments sound like rules, I apologize. Please regard them as emphatic suggestions. Painting should be a liberating experience, not an ordeal filled with do's and don'ts. Bear this in mind too: what I offer is merely what I have learned in my lifetime so far, and certainly not the last word on how to paint. I give you ideas and procedures that work, but it does not mean my ways, or any of the techniques of the great Masters, for that matter, are the **only** methods, or the best.

You might come across what seem to be contradictions in my comments. For example, the need for control coupled with flexibility—or looseness of brushing joined with exactness of drawing. Such opposites, as you will discover, are complementary rather than contradictory. It is in the gray areas of pure choice, where there is no obvious "best" way that the true technical challenge lies. So much in art is a matter of impulse and judgment—when having the savvy and smarts to break the rules imaginatively yet convincingly makes all the difference. We artists work in a realm where instinct and emotion and intelligence mingle bewilderingly, and what works in one case may not always work in another. The foundations, however, of sound drawing, values, edges, and color remain constant. You need a very good reason to deliberately mess with them.

There is some repetition here as well, which is unavoidable because so much in painting involves overlapping ideas. Squinting down, for example, is essential for making judgments about edges, but it is also vital in determining values. Other ideas are repeated in what may seem like endless variations. This is on purpose because I consider them to be crucial—principles of accuracy and control, for example. You will also find much in these pages about the importance of knowing what we intend to convey with our art, and then doing it in an unaffected yet elegant way. I also dwell a lot on craftsmanship and its rewards, because all of my life I have been taught by good people for whom fine skill was practically a religion. How well I remember the observation: "There is nothing quite like watching a professional in action!"

Also there are a great many images in this book because I love books with pictures, and also because this is a great chance to show off a lot of my paintings. Some of them have no direct reference to the main texts. I offer them not only for your pleasure, but also to show as wide a variety of subjects and techniques as possible. I want to broadcast the idea that skillful painting has no limits as to subject matter and techniques.

Other images are appropriate to the text in the chapters in which they appear, such as the sequences in the chapter on Starting. Similarly, in the technical chapters such as Drawing, Values, Edges, and so on, I have chosen paintings and drawings I consider to be good examples of the respective topics. Wherever space allows, I have provided captions with anecdotal and technical information about the works, along with the titles, mediums, and sizes, etc.

A few words now about my background and the cultural environment in which I developed as an artist. My younger days were not easy times in which to obtain a meaningful art education. The reason stemmed from the predominance of Modern Art, and its emphasis on intuition and impulse rather than skill throughout most of the twentieth-century. The definition of Art itself had been radically altered away from what had been considered art before 1900. Indeed, most art prior to that time was largely repudiated as naive. Instruction in highly skilled painting methods along with the supporting technology was in many cases methodically phased out of school systems and replaced by a laissez faire do-it-yourself arrangement. Representational painting was simply renamed *illustration*.

The reasons why such a foolish situation came about are complicated, but it did. However, The American Academy of Art in Chicago was among the few schools in the United States in the 1950s which still offered comprehensive teaching in drawing and painting. By sheer luck (it seems now) I was accepted as a student and immediately placed in the advanced painting group under William H. Mosby. My anatomy studies were under Anton Sterba. Both Mosby and Sterba were European schooled Masters.

My formal training under William Mosby involved working from life exclusively, using at first the conceptual and technical methods of the Direct painters—the Flemish, Dutch, and Spanish Masters, and then the artists of the Golden Age of painting—the late nineteenth-century Italian, Scottish, French, Slavic, Russian, Scandinavian, and American painters. The aim was not to imitate their styles, nor was it necessarily to adopt their brushes or colors and mediums, because such things are not fundamentally different from the tools and materials we use today. My quest was to understand what they *knew*, how they *thought*, and how they put it down on canvas.

I learned what their problems were, and how they approached them in the context of their times. I saw how each generation of painters drew from knowledge handed down to them, and then created new solutions to deal with the ever broadening scope of art. During that intense learning phase of my training, fidelity to my subjects at the moment of painting was always the aim. I was disciplined to understand my tools, to analyze what I saw, then render it faithfully.

Later, away from art school and out in the real world, I faced the challenges all painters must. Real life can be a shock after the reassuring environment of the classroom. In my case, the shock was more like a rocket blast-off, a shove forward to try painting everything in sight. Nothing was safe from my brushes. What followed was, and still is, a long story of experience and mellowing, but the result was a familiarity with paint that seems like second nature to me now.

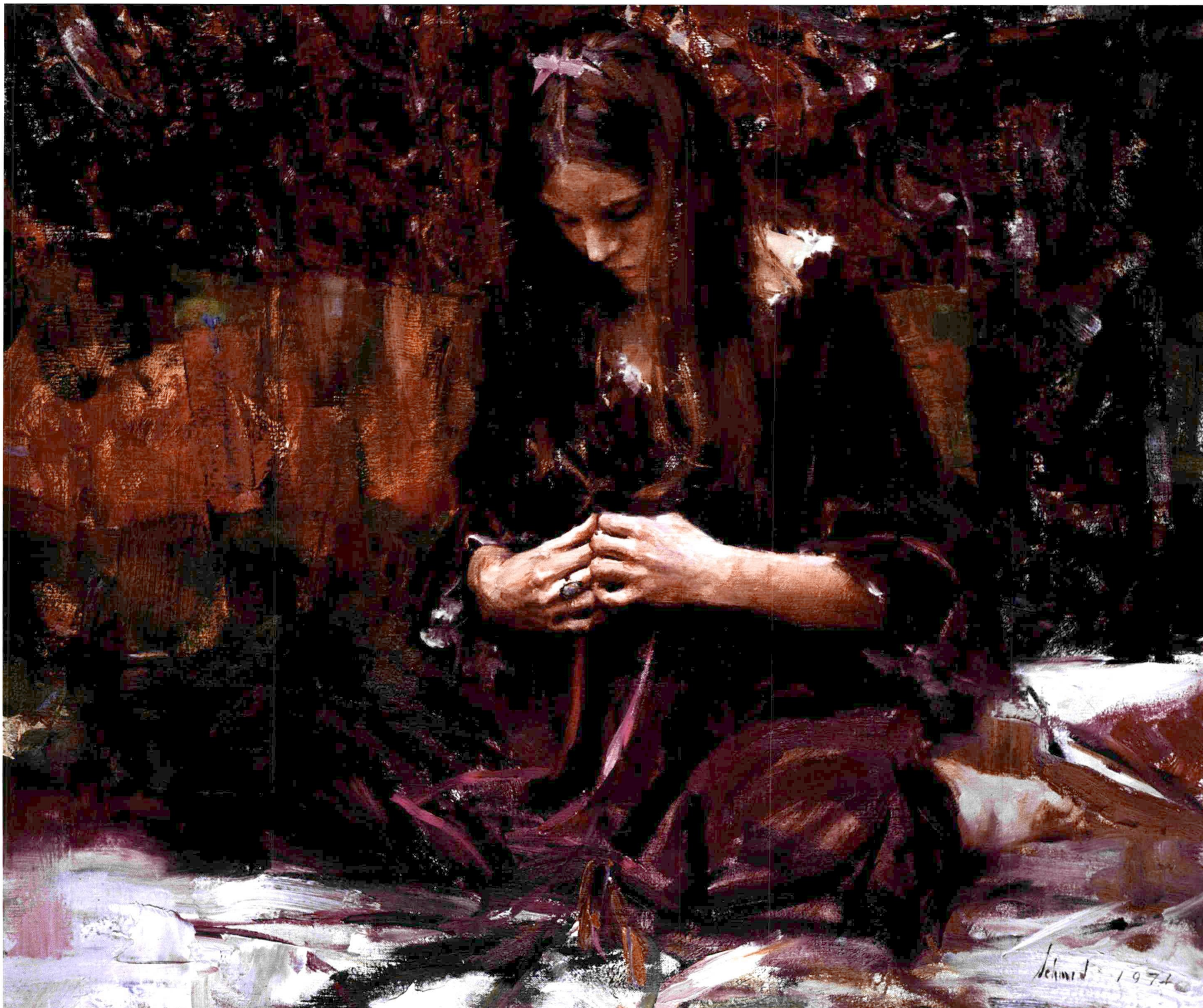
The richness of my experience with Bill Mosby is impossible to overstate. As the years have gone by, I have come to realize the magnitude of what I received from him. I haven't the slightest idea of *why* I understood it all so clearly, but I did, and I have always felt I was a *custodian* of that knowledge rather than its owner.

Painting has been my dearest friend for almost seventy some years now. My skills and the priceless freedom to use them are the most sacred and faithful gifts I have. They have opened up a world that few others ever have the opportunity of experiencing. I hope this book will help open the door to that world for you as well. Godspeed.

Richard Schmid
New Hampshire 2013



CHICKEN oil on canvas, 16 x 20, 2007



VELVET ROBE oil on canvas, 30 x 36, 1971

CHAPTER ONE—GOOD IDEAS AND FREE ADVICE

What could be more wonderful than the life of a painter? Beyond the usual necessities, we live out our days needing little more than a box of paints, some brushes, and something to paint on. We have no boss, employees, or financial backers. We don't require a performance hall, a publisher, a hi-tech video studio and crew, a foundry, or for that matter in these days with the Internet, even a gallery. All we really need is a continual passion for what we are doing, and a reasonable amount of evidence along the way that we are accomplishing something worthwhile. For most of us, that means at least painting skillfully enough to have satisfying results, perhaps even achieving a level of virtuosity.

Whether you are a professional artist, a student, or you paint just for the sheer enjoyment of it, you ought to be serious about it, at least while you are painting. Please ALWAYS give it your best shot. Have a warm respect for your art and cherish your affection for it. And NEVER demean your efforts because you think you're not in a class with Rembrandt. Paint the things you most deeply respond to, and use any legal means necessary to make your work come out the way you intend. (That's what Rembrandt did.)

Like other painters, I sometimes shudder when I see some of my early work, but to be honest with myself, I know that being such a zealously dedicated young chap, I truly was trying my best at the time. Since it was (and still is) literally *impossible* for me to do more than try my very best, who could have asked for more?

Today I am certainly aware of the shortfalls or mistakes in my current paintings, but those are merely little messages, tiny whispers of admonition telling me to slow down and be more careful. I remind myself that if I were perfect, I would be the first and *only* person in the entire history of mankind to be so blessed. Besides, if I got it precisely right every time, it would be no fun. So, while I certainly cannot ask myself to do more than I realistically can; at the same time I must continue to push the envelope, to set my sights ever higher, and to always try something I've never tried before.

TALENT

Don't bother about whether or not you have it. Just assume you do, and then please forget about it. Talent is merely one of those convenient words (like gifted or endowed), that we use *after* someone has become accomplished. There is simply no way to detect it *before* the fact, or when someone is still grappling with the learning process. It is impossible to predict when or if mastery will click into place. The only time we can be comfortably sure about high skill is when we finally go to Carnegie Hall and hear our little cousin Charlie play the Mendelssohn violin concerto for the *second* time. (The first time might have been an accident.)

The exceptional skill we label as talent is not a single capability. It is a complex mixture of motive, curiosity, receptivity, intelligence, perception, sensitivity, expert teaching, perseverance, problem solving skills, timing, sheer luck, and countless other things. If any part of it is genetic, divinely endowed, the result of astrological fiddle-faddle, fate, or destiny, that part is not the sole determining factor. All the other ingredients must be present in the right combination—and no one knows the exact recipe.

Artistic skill—the ability to draw well and make paint behave—is not a natural endowment like big blue eyes or great legs. Nor is it a special knack you simply have or do not have, like a "green thumb," a "natural sense of rhythm," or "surgeon's hands." (Those things are nonsense too.) Neither does it matter whether your parents, grandparents, or any of your ancestors were artists, except insofar as they may have motivated you, taught you, or served as role models.

You can learn the skills required for painting in the same way that you can learn anything else you are strongly drawn to. I don't mean to understate the difficulties, however. The great painters devoted their lives to their art, often to the point of total obsession. Serious painting is not something that can be learned casually. You must be willing to sacrifice many other things. So don't waste time worrying if you are talented—and don't blame any failures on the lack of it—*that* is the ultimate cop-out.



CHRISS gouache on gesso panel, 13 x 18, 1988

Strictly speaking, this is not a pure gouache painting. It is a watercolor with opaque white added here and there in the light areas. I find a work done solely with actual gouache pigments lacks the deep transparency of watercolor in the darks. The effect here is nearly identical to egg tempera, but without the eggs. I prefer to eat them. The delicate quality of the work (compared to oils) was possible because I used real gesso, calcium carbonate and hide glue, for the ground instead of the acrylic version. (Too glossy.)

LEARNING

Please don't be afraid to learn. You might think it goes without saying, but I am quite serious in mentioning it. The idea of having an aversion to learning may sound silly, but in some quarters learning is a definite no-no. Throughout the past century and even today, an astonishing number of otherwise intelligent people in the field of art education seriously believe and teach that learning the technical essentials of painting will inhibit an artist's creativity—that chic contemporary art today is all about spontaneity and impulsive acts, and *those acts alone* matter. The theory is that everyone is a natural-born artist, and the source of art is somewhere deep within the human spirit, and any influence from the outside (such as established knowledge) will somehow contaminate the purity of the interior process. All that is necessary is to "let go," and a force from within will manage things.

I've always had trouble with that. After all, Shakespeare, Bach, Michelangelo, Rembrandt, and all great Masters I know of were fine craftsmen who built upon hard-won skills and knowledge, and they weren't stupid. Johannes Brahms pointed out that, "Without craftsmanship, inspiration is a mere reed shaken in the wind." Even Mozart occasionally listened to his father!

I earnestly believe that if we are going to master a skill and stimulate new achievements, it is not wise to ignore what is already known—above all, technical information. Painting has occupied some of the greatest minds in history, so why not yours and mine too? We will never run out of fascinating things to study. Art is a living language with infinite possibilities awaiting. So learn *everything* you possibly can about it, then add your own insights, and use what you need. I believe that while you are in a strictly learning mode (as opposed to your creative sessions), you should suspend your "arty" sensitivities. Save those for when you are dreaming up your next masterpiece. Focus on the lure of problem solving, and enjoy the power of your successes.

FAILURE

Profit from your failed efforts. Each one is sending you a message about what you may be doing wrong. Find out what it is, and *please try not to do it again*. Easier said than done, I know, I know! Remember, most learning is simply the repetition of a correct action, so if you continue to repeat the same mistake, you are simply relearning it deeper and deeper each time. Stop and *think* when you mess up! Find out what is happening, and then do what is necessary to find out how to fix it.

I regard my disasters (too many to count) as invitations to learn more. They raise my hackles and dare me. My blunders tell me something technical (and therefore valuable) about what I do wrong. I see the mistakes I make for what they are—ordinary errors—and nothing more. In the same way, when you make mistakes, they do not reflect upon you as a person, nor on your intelligence, and certainly not on your artistic attributes. Mistakes are part of being human. So what? Don't take yourself so seriously. And never ever excuse yourself by claiming you lack talent. That's the easy way out of the effort of correcting.

YOUR CODE

Underlying all your choices, particularly subject matter and the way you represent it, should be your own personal scruples, the standards and guides that you voluntarily set for yourself, and which you may change or abandon whenever you choose, and without explanation to anyone. Your code should arise out of your passions and convictions. Your methods should come from the experience of what works for you. Don't take advice unless you respect the authority of the person giving it, *and* you understand it, *and* it is useful to you. However, don't reject difficult ideas simply because you fail to grasp them immediately. Put them on hold until you do understand, *then* decide. Many things in painting become clear only after considerable prior experience, and that takes time.

Without mindless imitation, don't be shy about borrowing other artists' good ideas. All artists have done that. It is why we have a vast body of cumulative knowledge from which to draw. Plagiarism, on the other hand, is passing off someone else's work as yours, but learning from their knowledge is an extension of their achievement. The caveat is that if you wish to study the works of another artist, make sure that he or she is competent. Watch out especially for the shortcomings of famous artists. Not everything they did was great art. They too had their bad days.

VIGILANCE

No matter how skillful you become, painting never actually gets free and easy. Even virtuoso musicians and professional athletes must practice regularly. Many things that were once difficult have been learned of course, but new challenges inevitably appear. Happily, once you really get the fundamentals under your belt, you will no longer, as they say, crank out the turkeys. However, if you expect masterpieces to effortlessly appear from then on, you will be disappointed.

The reason why painting remains so demanding (and therefore interesting) is this: as you improve, your results will be more rewarding, which will push you to increase your skill and to try new subjects and effects. The better you get at it, the more you see things in your subjects you failed to notice before. In other words, your perception, your ability to see new and more subtle elements sharpens along with your painting skill. That, in turn, will carry with it further-enriched insights and an urge to pursue even greater challenges, requiring still greater mastery, and so on and on. It is not exactly the law of diminishing returns operating here, because the returns always increase. It is the carrot and stick routine—you can never quite catch up because the demands of painting will always remain greater than your expertise.

CONFIDENCE

Self-doubt is utterly crippling to painters (and most everyone else too). Nothing will mess up our efforts more effectively than believing we lack "what it takes." Well, no one knows *exactly* what it takes, so how could anyone possibly know if they do or do not have it? Dear friend, they can't know and neither can you or I. Therefore, always give yourself the benefit of the doubt. Do yourself a favor—just assume you have enough intelligence to understand what needs to be learned, and believe you possess the simple ability to put a color in the right spot on a canvas when the time comes.

Have confidence in the many skills you already do have. After all, painting is not rocket science. Naturally, there is much that must be learned, but some of what is required to do a decent job of it involves nothing more than the good sense you learned from Mom and Dad or in grammar school. You have countless seemingly ordinary everyday capabilities which are not strictly technical art skills. For example, the everyday act of writing your name, or tying your shoes, requires *far* more manual dexterity than anything needed in painting.

As a child in kindergarten, you probably learned how to discriminate shades of colors from one another—colors such as navy blue, sky blue, green blue, robin's egg blue, red, maroon, pink, violet, purple, yellow, orange, and so on. In painting we simply have different names for those colors, and a more organized (and easier) way to work with them. Also as a youngster you learned other skills of perception, skills you scarcely think about because they seem so natural, yet they are critical skills needed for every painting—like how big or small things are, whether things are curvy, or square, or pointed, or fluffy looking, or all crooked, or transparent, or dark, or light, or gray, etc., etc.

I could go on and on listing all the things we learn before we are nine years old which today are routine necessities in painting, but I think you get my point. It is that we are perhaps much more fully equipped for art, and many other tasks, than we realize. And we got it long before we began training under a Master or in art school. Once in a structured learning situation, we do face the purely technical skills specific to painting, and they are largely intellectual—highly disciplined perception, problem solving, knowledge of the visual elements, and an understanding of painting materials and tools, and of course the body of highly developed methods and procedures of painting.

Fortunately, our young brains are pretty much fully formed by the time we take up serious art studies. By then we have more than enough of the mental equipment we need. Today, we have the rich sources of information we seek to fill our minds (like this book and many others, artist workshops, art magazines, and all the free and open sharing of information on the Internet). That is why we see so many accomplished young artists emerging today. While we may lack many of the great art academies of the past, with their structured curriculums, some are still in business offering serious art instruction.

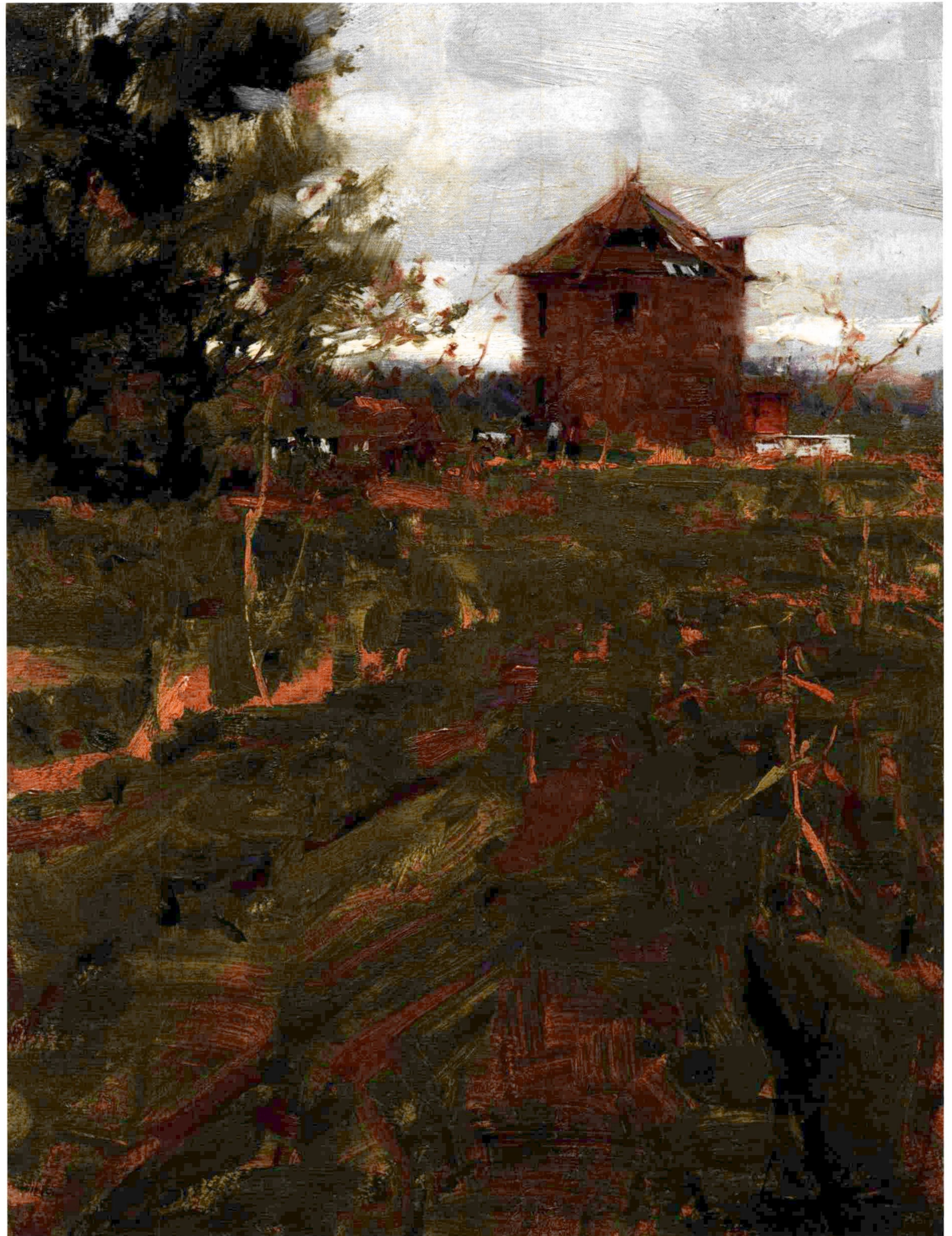
MINNESOTA HAY CRIB
oil on canvas, 16 x 20, 1989

I sketched this old corn crib on a late November afternoon in northern Minnesota. Folks in those parts probably thought it was just another fine day, but for me it was so cold I could barely grip my brushes.

Perhaps the cold was a good thing, because I was forced to work very carefully and avoid mistakes that might create time-consuming corrections. For the same reason, I also had to work in as direct a way as possible, and include only the most essential detail.

A nip of Schnapps to warm me up a bit might feel quite nice for a while, but if I do that, I will inevitably end up painting stupidly. Additional experience has taught me that booze is not a very good idea mixed with art, though a little alcohol in my paint keeps it from getting too stiff.

My wife Nancy was smart. She just watched me from the cozy warmth of our car. What I have learned for sure is this: painting the real thing, as it is happening, regardless of conditions, has a way of making me focus and paint in a way that studio work cannot duplicate.



Lucky for us, we painters do not need special physical attributes as dancers or athletes do. (Or the brute strength of sculptors.) We can be any size or shape or sex or race or age, and we don't have to endure the physical training musicians and most performers require. They say we don't even have to be fully sane, that it actually helps if we're a bit peculiar. I disagree of course. When I listen to the mayhem on the news each day, I realize that artists must be among the few truly balanced people on earth.

Physically, we need only our brains and eyes and reasonably steady hands. Lest we think otherwise—that we need something more—let us remember that some handicapped painters I know of do it with a brush between their teeth or toes. Even Renoir did not give up when he was crippled with arthritis, but chose to go on painting with a brush lashed to his fingers.

EN GARDE!

Stay alert and sharp when you work. Make sure your mind is fully engaged. Serious painting is not recreation or therapy or hell raising. It is intense creative work, even though it may have some or all of those other benefits. It is a visual language, and if you intend to say something articulate and worthwhile, you must be fully conscious. Stay healthy and eat well if you can—that romantic stuff about being a starving artist is absurd. It is much better to work with a splendid (but reasonably moderate) meal under your belt—but skip the wine or martinis. You need crystal-clear thinking to paint. Be good to yourself—take frequent breaks from time to time. Give your mind a rest so you stay fresh throughout the painting. Your work, after all, reflects you and your state of mind more than it reflects anything else. How many pictures have you seen that give out a message of fatigue, or boredom, or confusion, or frustration?

KEEP IT SIMPLE

Don't go overboard with exotic or complex ways to paint. Speak clearly and strongly with your brushes—Nature is more than complicated enough already. Our real challenge is to make it easier to sort out by abstracting it into a coherent and manageable number of brushstrokes on a two-dimensional canvas. Stick to simple solutions unless there is a good reason to do otherwise. Let your viewers first see *what* you are trying to express—hit them with your message—only then should you let them notice how beautifully you expressed it. (I think it is more decorous in that order.) Look to the paintings by Antonio Mancini, Valentin Serov, and Claude Monet, for perfect examples of powerful yet unaffected renderings.

John Singer Sargent, of course, is in a class by himself. If Niccolò Paganini was a magician with a violin bow, Sargent then was the Paganini of the brush. Both were so deeply refined and accomplished (Paganini was rumored to be in league with the Devil), that neither could avoid, much less suppress, the elegance of their bravura.

Don't wish for "secrets" of the Masters either. There are none worth fooling with. They had no special mediums or pigments, nor special brushes which made their work great. Our materials are unquestionably better than any they had. And an old and persistent belief that the success of some of the Masters (notably Peter Paul Rubens), was due to some secret mixture of who-knows-what they mixed into their paints, simply is *not* true. There is not the slightest evidence such stuff ever existed. Their only secret was what they knew—plus the good sense to slam into their problem head on. They dealt with painting in the most direct way they could think of, which is one reason why they are Masters. (And they had a lot of help from apprentices.)

So please beware of the lure of ostentatious techniques. Painting should never be an ego trip. Flashy tricks will not make your point stronger. It is the strength of what you are trying to convey with paint that counts. An easily understood rendering always carries more power. Remember, painting is not a performing art, nor a sport, nor a contest to see who can get the most attention.

Painting, I repeat, is a *language*. If the content of your work imparts something thoughtful, it will eventually be noticed. Don't be crushed if it doesn't happen right away. If you want to be famous, get into politics, or crime, or show business, or sports. If you paint just to get rich, shame on you. If you paint because you must do it or die, you are my kind of painter!

BEDROCK

Painting by its very nature is a discretionary act, and its latitude for expression is boundless. Even within the confines of representational painting, there is no limit to the ways a subject can be rendered and still look unmistakably authentic. This is possible because of the duality of human experience—the fact that all of us agree on much of what reality looks like (if we didn't we couldn't communicate), but we also experience reality in purely *personal* terms (which is why witnesses differ about the same event). Art lets us mingle these simultaneous yet seemingly incompatible aspects of daily living in an endless variety of ways. Painting especially can dramatically magnify the differences among the ways we see the same subject because our perceptions are inescapably *subjective*. In art training we are supposed to learn at least a degree of objectivity in the same sort of way a good reporter is expected to return with just the bare facts. But as artists we do not merely report. A painting is about our very personal response to what is before us. Perhaps that is the most extraordinary empowerment of painting. When we are bursting with some wordless experience. Art is our voice, the song of the heart.

As painters, however, we must always remember that our precious poetic visions and spiritual insights will remain forever locked within us until we can boil them down to a complex arrangement of a few hundred, or more likely, even many thousands of brushstrokes. Each of those strokes has four main characteristics—color, value, edges, and drawing. Those are the only things that get onto our canvases—Art happens in the mind of the person seeing them.



PATTI'S ROSES oil on canvas, 8 x 16, Vermont, 1999

FINISHING

When is a painting finished? That is indeed the question! The cynical old joke about it is that a painting is finished when the money for it is deposited in the bank. For some artists, it might be true, but I certainly hope not us, so I'll leave that alone for now. On a really good day I can finish a picture after only a few essential brushstrokes, but others seem to just go on and on. The time spent on a piece, and the number of daubs, however, are not valid measurements of the completeness or importance of a work of art. I recall a moment in *Amadeus*, the film about Mozart. In the scene, after a performance of one of his works, Mozart asked the Emperor how he liked it, to which the Emperor replied, "Too many notes!" Some artists naturally work fast, others like to take things slower. Johannes Brahms, for example, labored 21 years on his first symphony; George Frederick Handel finished his famous oratorio, *Messiah*, in 21 days. So, time spent working is irrelevant, so are the number of notes or brushstrokes. Also, the simplicity or complexity of a piece does not matter.

My personal test of completion rests upon the strength and clarity of the picture I envisioned at the start of my work. The picture I have tried to carry in my mind as my goal will tell me when I am done. I'm finished when I see on my canvas what I wanted to convey about my subject at the start. Nothing else matters!

Whether my piece is a modest little sketch or a large complex composition, I consider both to be finished when my statement has been made, when nothing I might add can make it better—or worse, when anything added might diminish it. So, The last question I must ask before signing a work should be this—does it look like what I want it to look like? If it doesn't, I must ask myself if I knew what I wanted it to look like in the first place. If I have somehow lost track along the way, I try hard to recall it before I go back to find out what went wrong.

Sometimes for one reason or another, I get a better idea halfway or so through a work and I change my mind about where I want to go with it. Politicians, in their customary myopia, brand such decisions "flip-flopping," as if changing one's mind when a better idea comes along is a sign of weakness. How stupid! We all make changes when reason or common sense intrudes, and we should. Happy accidents often occur in the course of working, particularly in watercolor—sudden unplanned, but delightful effects. Follow your instincts, preserve such treasures, and indeed change your mind. Let the politicians "stay the course" (another of their favorites), even if it means disaster. (In many cases it does.)

Suppose at a later date you see things you wish to correct or change in an otherwise satisfactory work? My earnest advice is to be very cautious. Do not simply try this or that—the let's-see-if-this-works method of fixing. That can lead to a sad situation where you may end up with a serious mess on your hands instead of a minor touch-up job. The trick is to think critically before doing anything. Know exactly what needs to be done, and do it with the least possible amount of alteration. Please see Chapter Six, page 174, for much more on later changes on dried paint.

ABOUT THE PROCESS

We all learn something each time we paint. However, when you are in a specific learning mode, for example if you are a student in an art school session or something similar, treat each painting session as a time to solve a specific problem. Set a limited goal—something you can do, as you intend to do it, in the time available, and under the circumstances in which you must work. This normally involves a compromise between everything you would like to do, and what is realistically possible. Remember that you must set the boundaries of what to paint (unless you are working under a teacher and that person sets the parameters). If something is visible, stays reasonably still, and is not in itself a blindingly bright source of light, it can be painted!

If the kids are coming home from school in ten minutes and the dog just threw up on the living room rug, don't even think about starting anything serious. More than just your urge to paint is required. The conditions must be right, your subject must be stable, the light must be adequate, and you must be free to work. Lately, I find it very difficult to do any serious painting if I know I have phone calls to make, or a pile of mail to deal with, or get the car serviced, or the garage cleaned, and so on and on.

When things pile up too high like that, I just give up! I pull out the phone connection, go to the kitchen, make myself a couple of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, lock myself into my studio, put some Mozart on my stereo—and paint. The world can jolly well wait.

As soon as you have decided exactly what it is about your subject you wish to paint, *ignore the rest of what you see*. Painting is not a challenge to render everything in sight. What matters both technically and artistically is the *quality* of what you do, not how much you can cram onto a canvas. A painting completely finished from edge to edge, but ineptly or blandly rendered is a waste of paint. An incomplete sketch superbly executed, is power!

So turn on your favorite music and forget everything except what you are doing! Work as if you were doing the last painting God or fate or the Federal Government will ever allow you to do. Do it with deliberate intent—with rapt concentration—as if you were making sweet love or better still, executing a perfect premeditated crime. But never tense up. There is no need to, because you are doing what you have been doing since you took your first baby steps. Paints were one of the first delights in your brand new world, a world you commanded and recorded in your childhood drawings and paintings.

Paint with unhurried pleasure, especially at the start. Enjoy the colors as they appear on your canvas. I always think about strawberries or ripe peaches with chocolate on French vanilla ice cream at such moments. Slowly, lusciously, stay in control. Move from one stroke to the next, the way experienced mountain climbers do. (They are never *ever* in a hurry.)

Pace yourself so you know what needs to be done and where you are going with your painting (and consequently, when to stop). There is no contradiction between being in control and giving free rein to your energy (ask any jockey, ask the horse too). It is a matter of doing things in the right order. *First* you must have the skills to control your actions, *then* you can cut loose and have fun. Doing it in reverse doesn't work. If you relax your grip without understanding what you are doing, you are in for trouble. Throw paint on with a shovel if it makes you happy (not recommended), but make very sure it lands in the right spot.



SPRING MIST oil on canvas, 8 x 16, Vermont, 2004

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CONTROL AND DETAIL

However I choose to paint, I try my best to get it accurate in every necessary respect. By "necessary" I mean those areas of a painting, which if not carried out correctly, would weaken my statement or make it ambiguous. I do not mean I must always paint in a highly detailed or "tight" manner. Tight, as in "man, *that* picture is so tight it squeaks," is painting slang for an image done in an overworked, hard-edged, and excessively complex way. Such works abounded in 19th century European art during the height of the Salon period, especially when photographs as aids came into use. In those days, many artists competed with one another in showing how ostentatiously detailed they could paint. The practice of painting in exhaustive detail throughout a work (from edge to edge) continues widely in our time, due mainly to an excessive reliance on photographs instead of real life as a primary source of subject matter.

In fairness to the average painter of the past, I must point out that today we know far more of the anatomy and physiology of the eye than they did. It is understandable then how they failed to notice the fact that we humans do not see the world around us in anything like complete detail. Thanks to a tiny area of our retina called the macula, we can only clearly focus with precise clarity within a very small central portion of our field of vision. The rest of what enters our eyes (our entire peripheral vision), is more or less fuzzy. (I can appreciate this because I have lost macular function in one eye.) In my opinion then, most gratuitously detailed paintings where everything is razor-sharp edge to edge, fall short of representing things as we normally see them.

LOOSENESS

In my view, detail for its own sake is a shallow goal anyway, because I don't think art is about how *much* stuff I can depict. When I paint I feel I am acting with both my emotions *and* my critical reasoning simultaneously. It is a way for me to share things in my life in the most lyrical way I can. In my view, the most eloquent performances on canvas, or anywhere else in the arts, are the ones that seem effortlessly graceful. We expect to see that clearly in dance, and we savor it in music, but it is in painting that the opportunity for lavish rendering overflows. I can certainly work in a splendidly loose and simple way and still be exact. Why? Because exactness is about *where* I put my brushstroke, how large or small it is, and what its shape is. Looseness or tightness is *how* I place that on my canvas—what my 'touch' is. It's something lovers understand. Precision and exactness are about drawing. Looseness or tightness are about technique, style, experience, and feelings. The fluid paintings of Anders Zorn and John Singer Sargent are classic examples; so are the splendid illustrations by the great American painters John Gannam and Harry Anderson.

"Looseness" is not a frivolous departure from control—quite the opposite! It arises from the freedom that comes with *superb* control. Any professional athlete or accomplished performer will confirm that. That's how they are able to make their wonders seem so effortless. Therefore, ***looseness should describe how a painting looks, not necessarily how it was done!***

JUDGMENT BY MEASUREMENT AND COMPARISON

In the course of learning our craft we all learn rather soon how very much painting requires making judgment calls! So, as soon as you are past the opening strokes and into the stage of your work where you are on course and *committed*, slow down and be on guard against just casually glancing at your subject and daubing. This is the time to watch out that you don't fall into that mindless-sort-of-dreamy state of simply looking and painting ***without seriously thinking***.

Each "look," to be really useful, ought to be a critical observation based on *comparison*. It should tell you if what you just did was correct or not, and what you need to do if it is not. If your brushstroke was good, your "look" should give you the information for the next stroke. There is a bit more to it than that, and I explain further in the appropriate chapters ahead, but basically, that is what critical seeing means. It is about comparing and more comparing—always and forever comparing what you see in the subject, to what you have placed on your canvas.

Measurement, of course goes hand in hand with comparison, and is most certainly essential when you are comparing for drawing elements—for the size and shape of things and how they fit together. Drawing can be tricky, especially so when a work is either larger or smaller than life and proportioning larger or smaller comes into play. So please avoid quick assumptions about the drawing aspect of your subject—take the time to look carefully at what lies before you. Measure and compare for every critical stroke you place on the canvas, then measure again against something already on your canvas that you are sure is correct. And please try not to let things that are obviously wrong linger for very long. If any significant area on your picture is in error (even though you know it is), it will nevertheless seriously affect your ability to make correct assessments of the accurate work on your canvas. It will be like a discordant noise intruding when you are trying to hear fine music. (Assuming of course you are not at a rock concert, in which case the bad sounds—the louder the better—are welcomed as part of the "music.")

**I TRY NOT TO LET KEY AREAS I KNOW ARE POORLY DONE REMAIN FOR VERY LONG,
LEST THEY MESS UP MY JUDGMENT—AND PROBABLY SPOIL MY DAY.**



SAND FENCE oil on canvas, 9 x 12, 2012

WRONG

What do I mean by wrong? *Wrong* is anything on my canvas which doesn't look like *what I intend* it to look like. I don't mean to suggest that wrong means any deviation from a strictly literal rendering of my subject. On the contrary, wrong as I am using it here means an unintentional swaying away from what I decided to have in my picture. It can be anything from a simple mistake in drawing, or color, or values, to a really ludicrous screw-up—like the time I painted, what even I finally had to admit, looked like goat horns on one lovely lady who posed for our Chicago group. The offending brushwork was merely intended to be fancy background stuff, but alas, I was just not paying attention, even though I knew something was not quite right. Therefore dear friend, whenever a little bell rings in your head as you put something on your painting that bothers you or doesn't look true, do not leave it there and go on to something else thinking it doesn't matter. *It does matter!*

It is the same as deliberately leaving ungrammatical words or erratic syntax in writing. If the author I'm reading can't spell or punctuate, those blunders wreck everything. Or to give another example, if I am at a concert and the soloist keeps hitting wrong notes (and doesn't seem to notice), I suffer for him or her and give thanks it's not me up there playing. It is exactly the same with this kind of painting. My brushstrokes are my words and notes. Every one is there for a reason, and for me they must be what I intend. If they are wrong, all sorts of mischief will ensue. Why do it?

I try not to do it, and it disturbs me if I still let it happen if I'm not wide awake. (It doesn't happen by itself.) All my life I have been trying to create images that you and everyone will accept as authentic renditions, but at the same time doing so in such a way that you will see what I alone experience from the many inherent possibilities within them. "Wrong" then for me is whenever I put something on my canvas that isn't what I chose from among the many aspects my subjects may present. In plain words, I want you, the viewer, to see as clearly as possible, what I, the painter, wish to express.

Exactly why is it then, that while they are sometimes difficult to pinpoint, colors which do not belong or things badly drawn exert a disturbing influence until they are corrected? It is because all elements in my picture are *interrelated*, like pieces on a chessboard. Every brushstroke and color shape is dependent on every other one for correctness. The structure I create is as fragile and vulnerable as a house of cards until I am finished. By deliberately (or otherwise) allowing something significantly wrong to remain, I frustrate my subsequent attempts at using comparison to make accurate judgments. I also undermine my ability to assess what sound work I have already done. Ignored mistakes make my good work look bad, and I don't want that. Do you?

PRELIMINARIES

At this point you're probably thinking about how earlier I was saying art should be fun. And now instead I've been rambling on about a lot of scary stuff like making mistakes and nasty things happening! Sorry. It's just that there is a lot to think about in painting, but that's what makes it fascinating. It can be complicated, but it is certainly not like one of those juggling acts where a fellow in a sequined suit comes out and tries to keep a bunch of bowling pins whirling in the air all at once while walking in bare feet on a long bed of burning coals, or like music which once started must continue at a stipulated tempo until the very end no matter what.

The nice thing about painting is we do it one daub at a time, and at our own speed. We know that paintings can't happen magically all at once. They must be done stroke by stroke, and much of what is done in the initial stages is not intended to be seen in the finished work. A good deal of what goes on at the start is preparatory work anyway and will not make sense or look "right" until the final brushwork is laid over it. This is usually referred to as "underpainting," and it is necessary at least to some degree in most efforts. My experience permits me to allow for these *intentional* approximations without being thrown off.

For my needs in painting from life, the preliminary lines and colors that go on at the start normally serve as color and compositional guides—the overall design of the pictorial elements of my starting block-in. They may simply outline the position of the main subject or indicate the general color harmony. The way I start can differ from one picture to the next, but they all share the same common purpose of getting me going. As with most other artists, the majority of my works involve some groundwork of this sort (usually very sketchy) to prepare the way.

Often, but not always, my first marks on a canvas serve merely to help me visualize various ideas without making an immediate commitment. I like my idea for a picture to be strong without being rigid. Why? Because while knowing what to say is vital, so is the flexibility to explore the best ways of saying it. With only a few exceptions then, the first paint strokes on my canvas are not intended to be squeaky accurate. However, once I have established where the major elements of my subject will be placed within the picture area, there is then no reason for me to continue in a sketchy way. I switch my thinking then toward accurate work. I have much more for you about all of this in Chapter Three on Starting.



ASPEN FOREST oil on canvas, 20 x 34, Colorado Rocky Mountains, 1990

SPEED

The process of creating art, especially painting, is not like a race, something to be finished as quickly as possible. Remember, your work, good or not so good, is likely to outlast you and most everything else about you, so take the extra time to do things right! That way you may avoid later embarrassment after you have departed, when you look down upon thy life and thy paintings from that great shining studio in the sky, and wish you *had* slowed down as Richard suggested.

So yes, do slow down for the hard parts. Take care for the easy parts too. Their easiness can be deceptive. Try to develop your own steady, relaxed, and enjoyable rate of working. I learned this gem when I was a young boy working alongside my father, my Uncle Harry, and many other skilled tradesmen over the years (mostly carpenters). They never rushed. They paced themselves to work at a rate they could sustain. A big part of it was they genuinely enjoyed what they were doing, and even more, they loved doing it as skillfully as possible, *and* they took great pride in their craftsmanship—a value I came away with as a gift from them, one I have always treasured.

So take the time to savor what you are doing. After all, you wouldn't gobble down a gourmet dinner. (Would you?) Work only as fast as the accuracy and content you wish to capture will allow. Achieving results more quickly will come with experience. However, in the last analysis what counts is not how fast a work is completed, but how long it will last. Besides, rapid painting is not a measure of how fast you can put paint on canvas. "Speed" is the wrong word too. *Expeditious* is a better term, because doing a painting in a short space of time means painting very *efficiently*, and it is necessary only when time is limited or when a subject is changing fast. A slow cool-headed assessment of what is occurring, what is needed, and careful paint application, are better than a frenzied dash to capture life as it is happening. When time is an issue it is usually best to just simplify—paint as little detail as necessary. We probably paint too much of it anyway.



BEGONIAS oil on canvas, 8 x 16, 2003

THE MAIN DISH

Once you are into the serious stuff, past the opening shots, and you know where you want to put your important items, don't make hesitant or random strokes any longer. They amount to aimless daubing in the vain hope of somehow accidentally making the right one. It is pure speculation, and the law of averages is overwhelmingly against you.

Also, avoid getting involved in what is called "licking"—brushing in the same area over and over while you decide what to do next. It is the equivalent of daydreaming, a substitute for thinking. I have watched many painters do this unconsciously. If you have painted in a group, you too have probably noticed a person with a dazed expression, locked into working on one small area of his or her painting, making the same brushmark over and over and over. If you are ever like that person (and we all *have* been), break the spell!

Take a break. Go have a cup of coffee and a couple of brownies. (Works for me! So does Brie and potato chips.) Come back and take a fresh look at where you are. Have another bite of brownie or Brie. Check out your picture in a mirror. A reverse image is usually a very helpful jolt. Forget the chocolate now and concentrate on forming a clear idea of why and where you are going to put your brush to your canvas. Look at the good work you have already done, and then compare it to the goal-image you formed in your mind at the start—the concept of what you want your final picture to look like. Critically observe what the differences are. (Analytical thinking.) Then try to decide exactly what line or color or edge you need before you jump back in.

As a special favor to yourself, resolve not to just *casually* glance at your subject and slap down something to see if it looks OK. Realistically speaking of course, we can't ever anticipate every little or big challenge that might arise in the course of creating a painting. Only very rarely do your daubs or mine actually fall into place with magical perfection. When it does happen it is an amazing experience, and we can't explain how it happened!

Nevertheless, I believe a painting should have a minimum of trial and error. Experience tells me the most reliable way to progress through a work is a very methodical way—working from one correct stroke to the next, then comparing for accuracy, and then moving to the next, and so on—a constant march forward from accurate work, all the while constantly comparing, never taking things for granted.

So verify what you are seeing on the subject for its shape, value, length, thickness, color, edges, and so on—then place your brushstroke. Then: 1. Step back to check it again against the subject. 2. Make a critical evaluation. 3. Step back to your canvas and either leave it alone or modify it as necessary. 4. Then go on and repeat this action over-and-over-and-over again for every few strokes you do. It worked for Sorolla, Zorn and Sargent. It works for me too and it will for you, once it becomes a habit! Stepping back frequently, and using a mirror are by far the best ways I know of to check for and maintain correctness.



SUNDAY AFTERNOON (Detail of Nan Reading), oil on canvas, 12 x 20, 2003

WHEN THINGS *REALLY* GO WRONG



Let's suppose I am happily working from life. I'm all fired up with a great start. I can see what I want in my mind. I know where I'm going—and **Dear God, my painting starts to come apart anyway!** If I can't see why immediately, I have a number of choices:

1. I can give up. (Good solution for a painting that was a silly idea to begin with.)
2. I can put it away in the closet and hope that the Paint Fairy appears and makes it look better in a week. (You never can tell . . .)
3. I can guess at the problem and try some optimistic dabbling at random to see what happens. (Really dumb.)
4. I can try faking it. (Which will certainly make it far worse.)
5. I can call in my friends and relatives for advice, but then I'll have to serve drinks and put up with their squabbling about what is wrong and how to fix it.
6. I can try altering the subject by rearranging things to fit my errant painting. This is possible under some circumstances with a setup such as in a still life, or with a model's position, but the options are very few and it leaves feelings of guilt.
7. I can get out an art book to see how one of the Masters handled a similar problem—not a bad idea, but no guarantee of an answer. I've never had much luck with this because their subjects and lighting never seem to be quite the same as mine. In any case, their paintings do not tell me about their struggle or the mental process they went through to solve their problem. I only see the distilled result of their success without an explanation.
8. I can play chicken by simply taking a digital photo of my subject and then do the project-it-and-trace-it routine to see if that works any better. Of course if I do, my resulting picture might be nice, or even a work of art, but I will not have learned much of any real value, and it will not be the picture I *really* wanted when I set out to paint in the first place.

9. This is the choice that works!—A PROCESS OF ELIMINATION!

We are all familiar with the famous Sherlock Holmes' deductive powers, but just as often as deduction he used a simple *process of elimination* to catch the bad guy. He did so by examining a problem and then rejecting all impossible answers. The remaining one, he would tell Watson (in the Hollywood version), was the solution—"Elementary, dear chap!" Likewise dear friends, Sherlock's elegant method is a reliable shortcut to fixing a naughty painting. It is not brain surgery or instinct, and requires no electronic device whatsoever, nor earnest prayer. By simply narrowing my search for causes of the crash, I can always find the problem. Fixing it is then possible, and I discuss the ways in the rest of this book. In most cases however the "fix" is usually obvious, indeed manifest, once the problem is understood. And so my process of elimination begins with this beautifully simple guiding thought:

Experience tells me that technical difficulties occur in ONLY *three* possible areas.

In my subject.

In the circumstances I work in.

In me.

My painting is *never* to blame, as suggested in the familiar lament: "My painting just isn't working!" (Or it isn't happy, or doesn't say what it should say, or doesn't have the right chemistry, etc.) So why then is it that my painting is not to blame? Because it is an inanimate two-dimensional assemblage made of paint and canvas or whatever. It is a mindless immobile object. It cannot talk either, and it surely cannot and indeed does not paint itself. *I paint it!*

This is how my thinking continues—if I cannot find the cause of the problem in my *subject* with things such as movement, change of light, drooping flowers, the model falling asleep, or whatever, and I can't find fault in my *circumstances* with my working environment—wind, rain, a rickety easel, insects, bad materials, crowds, a sick cat, noise, a rising tide, wild animals, armed hostilities, or any other disturbances—then I have to look at *myself* or the way I am painting. If I am sufficiently warm and dry, reasonably awake, not yet hungry, and I don't have to go to the bathroom, the problem *must* therefore be in what I am DOING!—so now I know it's about ME and I can forget all other causes!

The next question is what exactly did I do wrong? For the answer, the process of elimination must continue. I already know that there are only TWO possible errors in working from life. (Remember that—ONLY TWO!) To put it neatly they are:

1. Painting something that is *not* there in a subject (without a good reason).

2. *Not* painting something that *is* there in the subject, but is essential for credibility or clarity.

I also know that those two errors can only occur within one or more of the four visible elements:

With my COLORS, VALUES, DRAWING, EDGES, or SOME COMBINATION OF ALL OR SOME OF THEM.

AND NOWHERE ELSE !





MY FRIEND JOHN LOOKING CLOUD oil on canvas, 16 x 20, Colorado, 1994

Hallelujah! Now I'm getting somewhere! I have brought the issue down to useful questions such as: *In which of these four elements am I not seeing correctly? Am I departing from what I am seeing by putting in colors or values, or drawing shapes or edges that aren't there? Am I ignoring something essential about the variety of edges, or the careful drawing, or certain colors or values necessary for my painting to match my subject?*

With questions like these I can scrutinize my painting carefully in each of the four areas, and eliminate from consideration the ones I got right. What remains will be my problem area, and by implication, the solution. (Quite so, Holmes!) Thus—if my color and values check out OK, and the drawing is good, then chances are I have an edge or value problem, and I will only have to change some of them to be back in business.

Of course it isn't always *quite* that easy. A painting can sometimes be very complicated. It is always an interrelated visual system where errors often happen in combination. A color mistake will very frequently involve an error in value as well. Likewise, poor drawing invariably contains flawed edges, so you must be alert for simultaneous challenges—which I normally refer to in my own thinking as just one more damn thing after another. (I will have more on the relationship between color and value as we get into the chapters ahead.)

Despite these minor complications, this is still the best way I know of to get out of trouble. The process of elimination is rational and methodical. It will get you into a problem-solving frame of mind and away from the frustration of an aimless struggle.

WHAT NOT TO DO

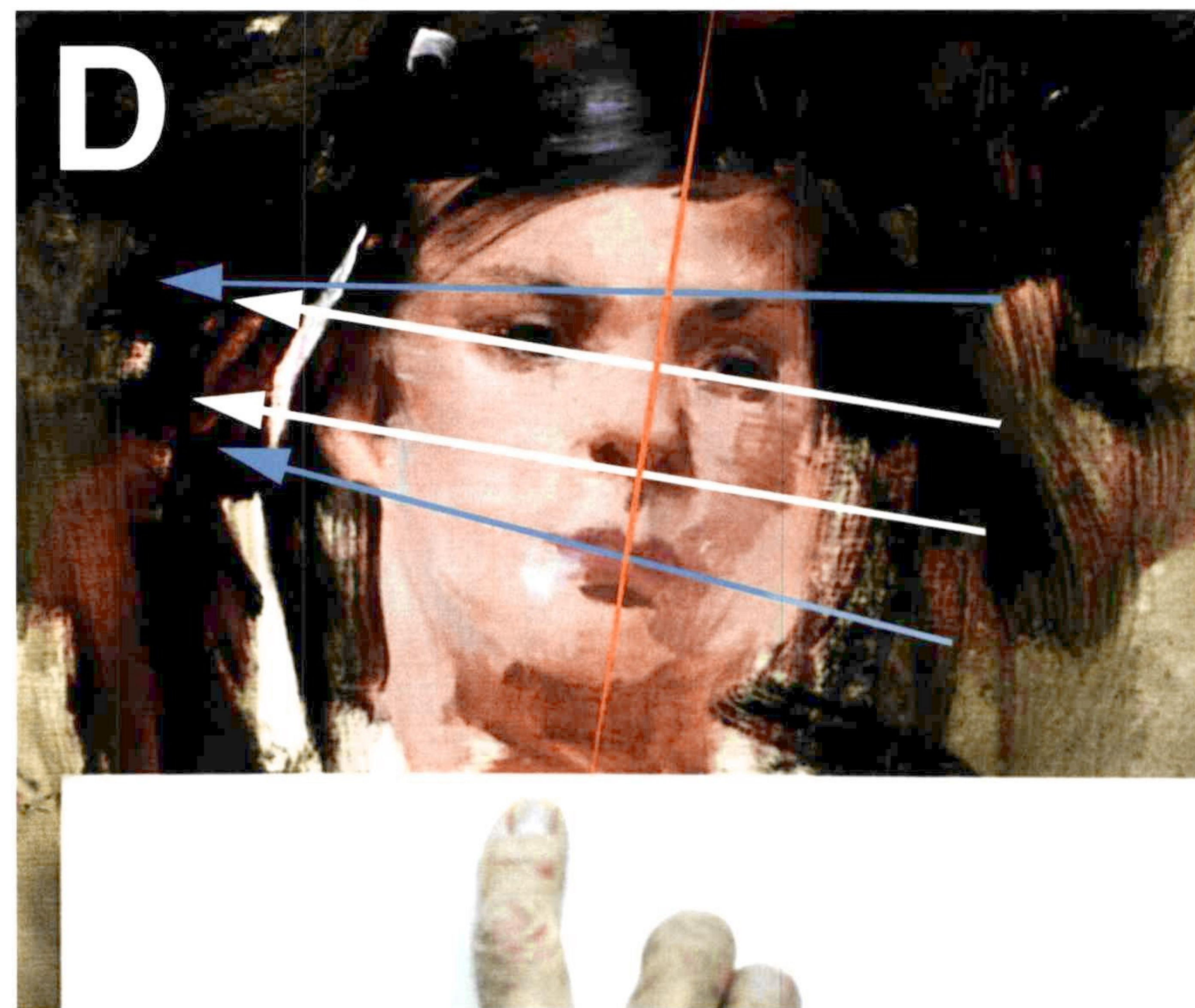
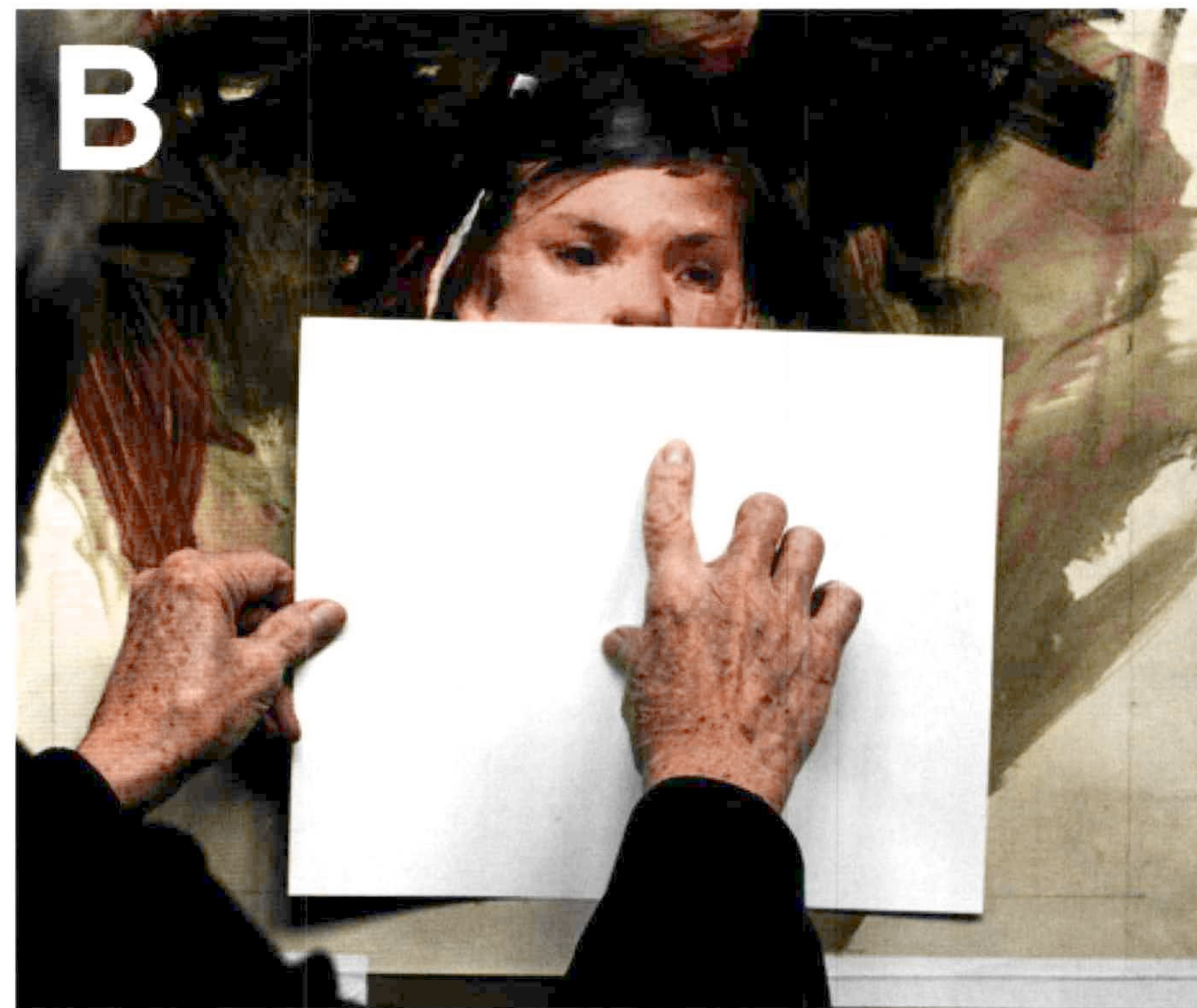
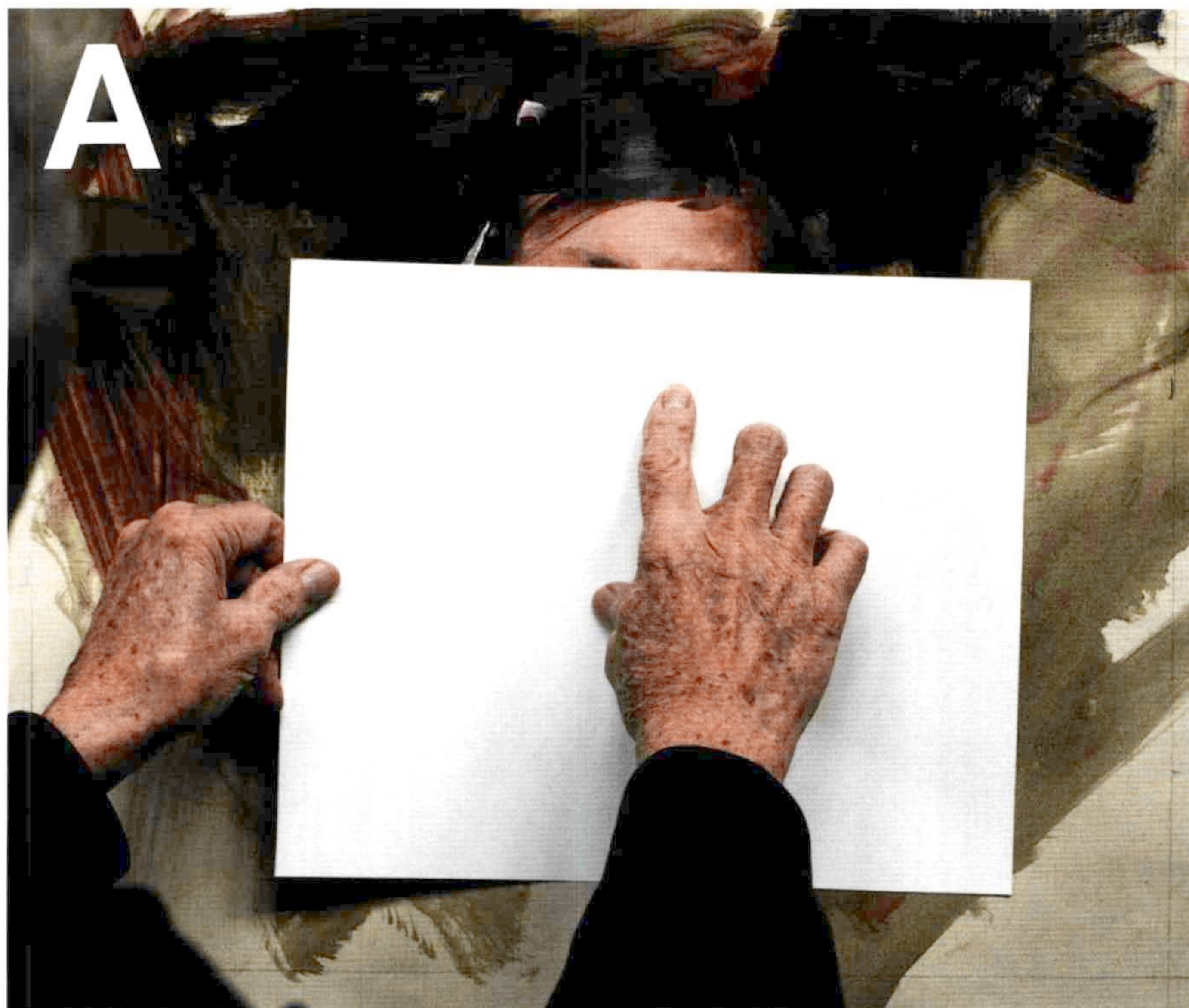
The last thing I would do if a painting is not turning out is to blame my talent, or fate, or use futile abstractions to define the weakness or flaws. I frequently hear some of my artist friends say their painting doesn't have the *feeling* they want, or it doesn't *sing*, or is without *passion*, or *inner fire*, or *excitement*. They may complain it lacks *authority*, or *sensitivity*, or the color is **dead**, or the whole thing just isn't **working**. Frequently painters turn upon themselves with, "I'll never get the hang of color," or "I always mess up the drawing," or "I just can't do people," (or trees or water, etc.), and so on. Such responses are useless.

For me, sentiments like these merely describe my emotions rather than anything tangible or technically useful about why I think I might have botched things. Expressions like those above cannot help solving a problem beyond acknowledging I do have one, and I am unhappy—the poor-dear-me syndrome. I can complain until doomsday, but complaining will not help. Qualities such as excitement, inner fire, passion, and soul do not come in paint tubes, nor do they emerge from my brush. Only paint comes off the ends of my brushes. Human feelings and perceptions only materialize when I use my skill to convert my fervor into finely organized bits of color, the way a pianist conveys emotion through appropriate pressures and speeds on piano keys.

If I am going to nail down my problem, I must translate my frustrations into clear-cut technical terms, not vague expressions. For example, if I think my color is not "sensitive" or "authentic," I have to ask myself what those adjectives denote. Invariably I get around to realizing what I really mean is my color isn't "clean." **That** adjective turns out to mean I am allowing complementary colors to intermix too much, creating a gray mixture resembling mud. ("Muddy" color, on further analysis, always turns out to be a color which is an inappropriate temperature—a too-cool color within what ought to be a warm shadow, for example.) I'm also probably holding back with the true values. As for lack of "authenticity," that just means I was too lazy to exactly match the colors to the subject or get the drawing right.

And so, when I am able to reduce a problem to a technical description, the solution pops right up. Recognizing I need more orange or yellow (or whatever) in a mixture will yield a result. Just saying my color is "wishy-washy" will not. On the other hand if nothing works, I may just be having a bad day, so it could be the *day's* fault, or perhaps the moon is out of phase.

IF ALL OF THE ABOVE FAILS, TRY MY FAVORITE TRICK ON THE NEXT TWO PAGES ►



At left is perhaps an easier version of using the process of elimination to reveal errors. It works well if the problem involves drawing and/or alignment during a block-in or any stage in a painting. Instead of using the reasoning sequence I described earlier, this simple method is purely visual. I use a sheet of stiff paper (or my hand) to hide the area in question, and then slowly lower the paper in small stages (as shown here), examining each stage for accuracy. The painting shown here was barely past the block-in stage when I felt things in the drawing were not quite right.

In image **A** I have uncovered the top portion, and so far so good, no obvious errors.

In image **B** I suspect the eyebrow on the model's left is slanting too high relative to her eyes.

In image **C** it is clear now that the eyebrow is off, but her eyes and nose are well aligned. The mouth, however, is out of line, slanting downward to her left, and a bit too low.

Image **D** shows my analysis. The parallel white lines show the eyes and nose in correct alignment with the center line of the head (shown in orange). The blue lines show the offenders, the eyebrows and mouth. Once I straighten them out, all lines will be parallel to one another. I will then be on track again to finish the sketch. (Ignore the unfinished areas, they don't count here.)



GRACE ARNOLD (Detail of final stage), oil on canvas, 16 x 20, 2012

To wrap this up, here is a little checklist of a few common mistakes and difficulties related to painting and functioning as an artist. I have experienced all of them and more in my seventy years of painting. Just as I think I have seen about everything, new ones still appear from time to time.

Trying to understand exactly what art is.

Believing I knew what art was (when I was younger).

Fear of making mistakes.

Trying to paint what I don't want to paint.

Worrying if what I am painting will sell.

Wondering if I'll ever paint something important.

Painting under excessive pressure or distraction.

Worrying about recognition.

Timid painting.

Hackneyed or boring paintings.

Careless drawing (not measuring).

Not squinting for values and edges.

Too many sharp edges.

Too many highlights.

Trying to paint *things* instead of color shapes.

Painting shadows too light.

Painting more values than are necessary.

Muddy color (color of inappropriate temperature).

Incorrect temperature changes.

"Pushing" bright colors arbitrarily (increasing their saturation).

Inventing impossible color.

Inappropriate paint thickness.

Miserly paint (too little).

Excessively thinned paint.

Unsuitable or cheap brushes.

Cheap cotton, or very absorbent canvas. Poorly stretched canvas.

Painting too fast.

Painting over life-size without a good reason.

Painting very small without proper brushes.

Allowing too little time.

Aimless brushstrokes.

Working too close, not stepping back frequently.

Faking it.

Overworking what should be left alone.

Showing off.

Trying to paint too much, especially detail.

Working from inadequate photos.

Working from photos taken by others.

Excessive glare on the canvas.

Changing conditions in the subject.

Unsteady easel.

Not cleaning palette and brushes while working.

Dealing with galleries without expert legal advice.

Failing to take good photos of my work.

Trying to paint what is not possible to paint.

Confusion—trying to do everything at once.

Poor working light.

Movement or fatigue of a model.

Deficient palette—poor selection of pigments.

Taking art critics seriously.

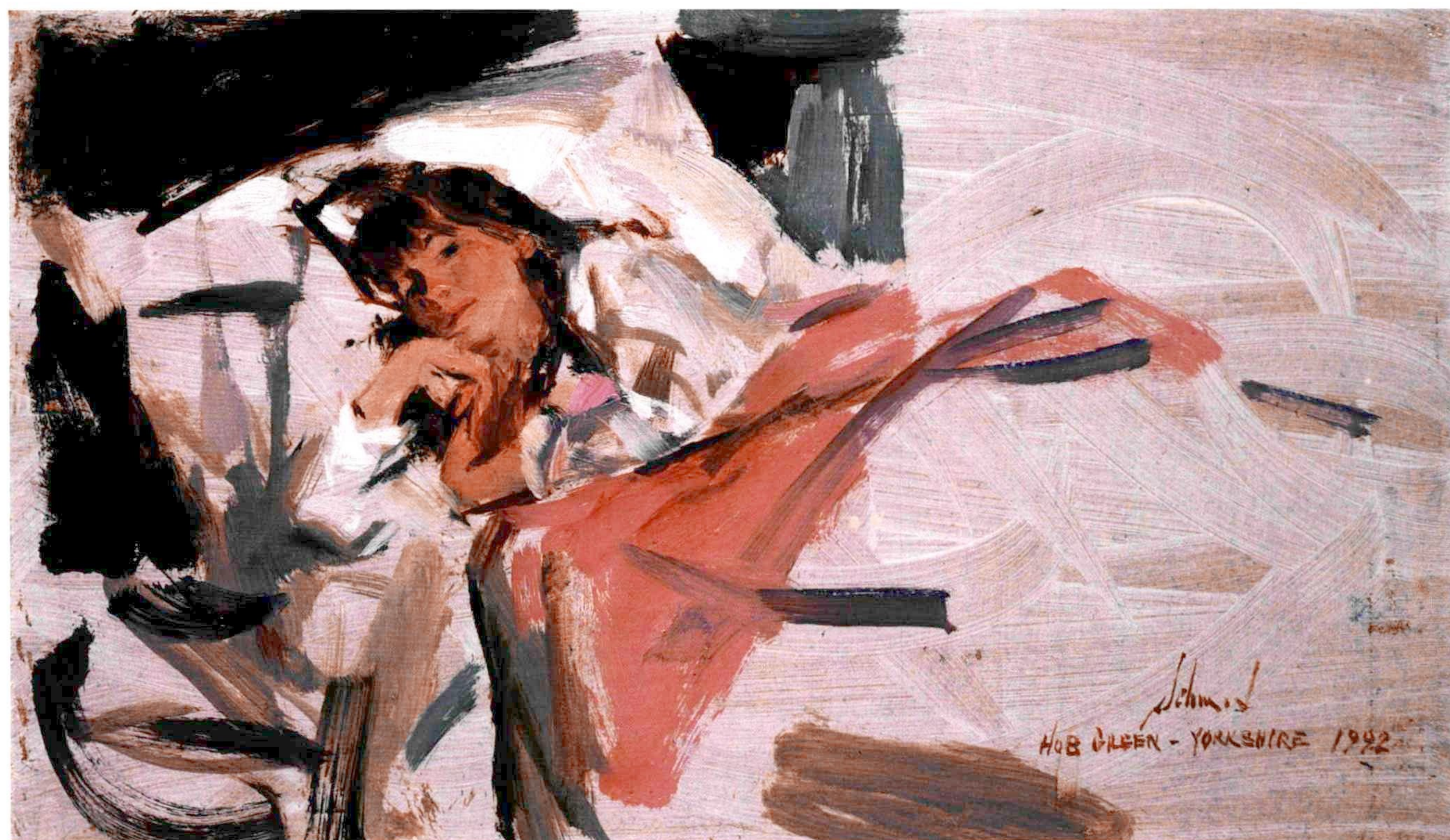
Neglecting to keep good business records.


Taking myself too seriously.

Please do not let this list intimidate you in any way. There is nothing above I cannot easily deal with if it arises. Indeed, most of them occurred less and less, and eventually ceased happening altogether as I got better at painting and adopted a professional attitude. For me, the only ones that never go away, that need constant vigilance, are about good drawing, appropriate color temperatures, strong values and well understood edges.


YORKSHIRE MORNING
oil on panel, 6 x 10, England,
1992

Nancy and I have a few little customs when we travel. We like to try to pose for one another for a half-hour every day, no matter what. I did this little twenty minute sketch of her as she was waking up one bright morning in our bed and breakfast—the same English estate where she posed while having breakfast. (See page 187.)





CHOICES



We who chose to be artists or somehow drifted into art by other means, are immensely fortunate to have had the freedom to do that. We certainly made decisions about entering the field of art, and most of us work diligently at it, but we did not create any of the choices offered us, nor did we create our ability or inclination to follow them—which is why we should never forget how incredibly lucky we are to find ourselves possessed with a passion for art.

Moreover, the very nature and source of what is called talent simply cannot be satisfactorily explained. Even if some have the misplaced pride to cling to the belief that a special source, such as a divine super being, or genetic destiny, or some grand design in the universe, handpicked a lucky few from all other humans on our planet to be artists, they can never know why, much less take credit for being among the chosen. We speculate endlessly about what and why we paint, but always the fundamental reason we are drawn to our labor, and perhaps excel at it, remains elusive.

Our culture commonly holds that we artists have received a gift, a special talent others do not have. I think a much better word for what we have access to is *opportunity*. For whatever reason, circumstances in our lives have somehow converged to offer us a golden chance to pursue a life of creativity—the freedom, without passing judgment, or causing intentional harm, to express almost anything we wish in any way we choose. That much is all we know for certain. The rest is sheer guesswork. One thing, however, stands out and ought never to be ignored—it is that the opportunity offered is a most precious one, and it is not to be accepted lightly.

I strongly believe that this extraordinary opportunity so dear to us represents a trust, and therefore an obligation, to act wisely and unselfishly in how we practice this art, of which we are, after all, only temporary custodians.

Though art has so far defied universal definition, its power is undeniable. With this in mind when choosing from among our ideas and how to portray them, let us think about what is important to us, and what is truly worthy of serious artistic expression. Remember though that it matters little whether our subject is ordinary or grand, because the things we choose to paint are merely the frameworks upon which our underlying convictions unfold.

Therefore I believe we should set our sights high. Great art, even when it deals with tragedy, is always an ascending rather than a descending act. At its best, art is a sublime vessel, hardly appropriate for taking out our personal garbage. In the end, no one really cares about our psychological problems, or our politics, nor our tantrums and childish rebellions—and they certainly don't want our preaching or grandstanding.

If we stubbornly pursue excellence in our perceptions and skills, we can offer paintings that nourish the human spirit rather than mock it, as we so often witnessed in the 20th century. We will do well to take a lesson from the great Masters—and create works so compellingly beautiful and enduring, in our minds and those of posterity, that a world without them could not be imagined.

Richard Schmid 2013



BENGAL TIGER gouache on paper, ss 16 x 20, 1971



SAPPHIRE oil on canvas, 16 x 21, 1988

CHAPTER TWO—ALLA PRIMA OR DIRECT PAINTING

WHAT DOES ALLA PRIMA MEAN?

Alla Prima is Italian for "at the first." As an art term it means completing a painting, almost always from life, in one sitting or in a single session. In French it is called *au premier coup*, "at first stroke." In German they say *in einer Sitzen*, meaning "in one sitting" (my translation). Today it is more popularly called "wet on wet," or *DIRECT PAINTING* (the term I shall use hereafter).

Many of these terms came about as early as the mid seventeenth century as painting in Europe was in a slow transition away from the tedious and time-consuming methods involving extensive underpainting followed by layers of colored glazes. Artists such as Rembrandt and Franz Hals, for example, began their careers as "glaziers" but ended up working more like direct painters. In one case, Diego Velázquez in his later portraits foreshadowed Impressionism by two hundred years with an unmistakable broken color version of direct painting. There is no question in my mind that direct painting was the precursor of the Romantic movement itself, because of its unique new freedom of working, which resulted in a greatly expanded opportunity for self-expression. There is, however, a lot more to *Alla Prima* than simply cutting loose from a beautiful but somewhat constraining way of making pictures.

FIRST, A BIT OF HISTORY

Looking back in time, I find it hard to imagine the average citizen of Pre-Renaissance Europe relating to very much in paintings the way we respond to serious representational art today. For one thing, the notion of art as a vehicle of self-expression had not yet appeared. Subject matter was largely confined to biblical episodes, the allegory and mythology of antiquity, and glitzy tableaux of powerful people such as royalty, clergy, warriors, and the like (and lots of saints, angels and cherubs). I believe it can be said that during those early European centuries of widely sustained illiteracy, pictures were, more often than not, the way people received a version of their personal *weltanschauung*, or world view. It was similar to the way in which Hollywood and television provides the same service today. Moreover, the ways such things were depicted in those good old days were far removed from any ordinary person's personal experience.

If you trace the development of imagery used in Western European Art (our dominant roots), you will notice elements in pictures did not begin to look "natural," that is to say with authentic looking colors acting in light and shadow the way you and I see everyday things, until the early to mid-seventeenth century. That was not very long ago in the long history of art. Except for the development of a practical system of *Linear Perspective* by Filippo Brunelleschi in 1413, we seldom find a painter even attempting a naturalistic depiction of what human beings actually saw.

Painting techniques were highly stylized, with lights and shadows serving merely to model the forms of subjects rather than depict the true light and shadows acting upon them. Colors were most often used as flat tints, and very little looked like what we today would call "real." In making these observations I do not in any way wish to sound judgemental, or give the impression I think artists of early, mid, or late Renaissance times were less sophisticated or lacking in artistic abilities. They were then, as *we* are now, using the tools, methods, and aesthetic sensibilities of their respective periods, and much of what they handed down to us remains unsurpassed today. The violins of Antonius Stradivarius remain unexcelled, the stunning portraits by Hans Holbein are lessons for today's painters, and Michelangelo is still the standard by which sculpture is measured.

As art continued through subsequent periods, artists reflected their respective times in their paintings. New methods and subjects appeared while others faded away. With the coming of the Enlightenment and Romanticism, even greater changes took hold, but the first steps in this long journey were taken in the Italian Renaissance.

LET THERE BE LIGHT (The really important stuff.)

While there had to be some awareness among early painters about the role of light in the visual field, there was little serious headway in dealing with it until an astute Italian named Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571–1610) and his colleagues introduced and fine-tuned the concept of **Chiaroscuro**—the use of high contrast light and shadow to not only show form, but also to impart dramatically moving effects of light. Caravaggio's amazing success in creating such powerful new pictures provoked a major revolution in visual perception, and rocked the world of painting.

Because his use of *light and shadow* as distinct pictorial elements was a new concept, the idea did not catch on as fast as linear perspective did. After all, it was quite a lot to swallow for painters who had thought only in terms of *physical* form. Even when the use of light and shadow in painting did catch on later, it took a few more generations before shadows (with their tricky color temperature reversals), were understood well enough to be rendered with a look of naturalness. Indeed the concept of light temperature and its behavior in shadow areas was so slow in coming that even Rembrandt did not quite grasp it. He was, however, so very skillful in observing and capturing colors in the lights, those occurring in his shadows were never an issue.

The difficulty with light as *the absolute determining factor* in all aspects of seeing, was that it went against the traditional common sense notion that people and objects simply "look like what they are," (whatever that can *possibly* mean), and that they exist out there in an invisible space called air. It's rather like the joke in Semantics—the one about the day Adam and Eve decided to give names to all the different types of animals in paradise: The first to be named was a large, sleek, four-legged creature. Eve took one look and suggested they call it a *Horse*. When Adam asked why the name Horse, Eve said, "*Because it looks like one!*"

I guess my point is that assumptions and unexamined traditional thought can easily provoke resistance to brilliant new ideas. Artists were certainly aware of light, but judging from their paintings, light to them served only as a source of illumination and did not affect the actual *appearance* of an object. In their minds a horse still looked like a horse regardless of the direction, intensity or color of the light upon it. Well, it was hard to argue against ignorance (and risky, as Galileo found out).

MUCH ADO ABOUT SOMETHING

The die-hard traditionalists of the day must have been appalled at the very thought of Chiaroscuro. After all, the new idea threatened the preeminence, not to mention the validity, of what was unquestionably great art (theirs). Their standard way of doing things had always worked well for everyone, and also paid the bills. Caravaggio's introduction of *light* rather than *form* as the primary ingredient in the visual field must have shaken the art world as much as Einstein's Theory of Relativity shook the world of physics. Why? Because it was a great deal more than merely a threat to the status quo.

One problem in those days was the difficulty of understanding light and the perception of it. As we know, people tend to fear and put down what they do not understand. Valid scientific knowledge, not only of the nature of light, but also of human vision (how we see), was simply not available then. Naturally, theories abounded. Some were misguided, others came close, but none were quite satisfying, and so the mystery lingered. Wave-particle theory, photons, the electromagnetic spectrum, the retina, optic nerves, LED flashlights, cataract surgery, etc., all were yet to enter into our general knowledge and vocabularies.

Their real question back then was not with the mystery of light *itself*. The challenge was entirely about dealing with the ordinary everyday uncertain behavior of light—it fluctuated! It got lighter and darker and had a very annoying way of changing direction as the sun moved. That was a simple immutable fact, and it brought painting into an area of unpredictably—a very disagreeable notion to Renaissance minds accustomed to tidy order. Painters mainly used daylight to work by, usually light from a north facing window. When darkness fell, their alternatives were few, and all of them involved fire in some fashion. Imagine working from candles, blazing torches, oil lamps, or even just a fireplace to see by. How very fortunate we are today to have so many excellent artificial light choices!



QUICK SKETCH OF ROSES AND CARNATIONS oil on canvas, 8 x 12, 2004

A study such as this could not have happened (at least not on purpose), before the Romantic movement or the full arrival of Direct Painting. For one thing (judging from the works that have come down to us), the scintillating beauty of paint itself was not imagined as something important to achieve along with a subject. Only the people and events they painted were singularly important. Light and shadow and color were yet to play significant roles. How different it is today. I remember so clearly painting these flowers and thinking it did not matter what they were. All I really cared about was the succulent paint appearing like candies on my canvas.

LETTING GO

Another result of the general thinking among early painters (and some today) was this: When they viewed their subjects as people and objects and whatever in a setting and so on, rather than *patterns of visual shapes generated by light*, they had to paint what they *knew* about them—what else was there to go by? Naturally then, the more they knew about what they were painting, the better their work would turn out. And thus we arrive at the sort of predicament the British refer to as *a spot of bother*—painting all the things expected of them meant lots and lots had to be studied and memorized, because there are a lots and lots of *things* in the world. Of course there were far too many to learn them all, and so they specialized. They painted what they became best at.

To this day the artists of those times (as many today) can be instantly identified as much by the narrow range of their subjects, as by their styles and periods.

THE DAWNING

They did their best, and some of their best was breathtaking. Something, however, possibly the dreariness of all that endless memorizing, must have gotten to some of them, particularly artists in the Netherlands and Spain. They were drawn to the new idea that light might indeed be the operative element in their craft, and they gradually eased into simply painting what they saw. I believe it took real courage to depart from the safety of well-established methods, because no one at that time really knew what light was, except it was great stuff and OK to paint it at last. What an exciting time to be a painter!

They were the first to trust their powers of observation alone and paint the *appearance* of things rather than merely what they knew about them. In the process they presented us with the stunning gift of their new insights. Instead of trying to depict subjects only according to their external forms, those artists began to concentrate on capturing the effects of light which actually made subjects visible. It was an effort which, fortunately for us, turned out to be one of the most liberating discoveries in the history of art. They had opened the door and entered into a realm of brilliant and undreamed of beauty.

ADDED INGREDIENTS

I must mention as well three other developments that came afterward to launch art into what is now regarded as a second Golden Age of painting, roughly the period from 1840 to the end of the century. The first was the emergence of Romanticism in the late eighteenth century. It was a potent revolutionary idea recognizing the dignity and rights of common people. It gave us the United States Constitution, the French Revolution, the fall of monarchies, and transformed art forever by recognizing that self expression and the everyday life experiences of ordinary women and men were legitimate subject matters for art.

The second item was the accelerating advancement in the sciences, including Color Theory, which resulted from a growing understanding of the electromagnetic spectrum, which in turn led directly to the broken color techniques of Impressionism.

The third big advancement was in the technology of practical photography. We all know what *that* did, and is still doing.

A fourth item, the invention of the lowly paint tube, should also be mentioned. We take it for granted today, but that *one* single little object allowed painters to conveniently carry their colors anywhere. It liberated artists from their studios and made landscape painting, as we know it today, possible. It should rightfully take its place in history along with the safety pin and zipper!

So we see in the span of only 400 years, we acquired the means to depict things in three-dimensional space; to paint quickly and accurately almost anywhere on earth; to use anything imaginable for subjects; to understand color; and to store visual information instantly. (And all without a computer!)

I do not include the emergence of abstraction and all the other endless "isms" of Modern art as milestones, because I cannot imagine how they could possibly fit in with the evolutionary continuity of painting development I am describing here. I shall leave it to historians and sociologists of future generations to figure out why those things happened in art, if such is within the bounds of reason.



QUICK SKETCH OF DON oil on panel, 8 x 9.5, 1991

SEEING THE LIGHT

New generations of painters in the 1700s such as Sir Henry Raeburn in Scotland, Gilbert Stuart in America, and eventually many others, continued the direct painting concept. While a few continued to use glazing with wet-on-wet methods, their way of seeing a subject was anything but traditional. It is hard for us to imagine how those painters must have struggled to understand what they were seeing, because today the ideas they explored seem like self-evident facts about perception and light.

Thanks to their efforts and discoveries we know beyond any doubt that no matter how hard we try, we cannot ever physically "see" anything or anyone. The world is visible to us only because of the light radiating from it or reflecting from it. ***It is obvious now that light is the only thing we can paint.*** Think of it! You only have to learn to paint the effects of light—no more memorizing of things. What a splendid gift they gave us! It's almost too simple to be true, but it is true, dear friends, and it can extend the range of your subject matter far beyond your dreams, surpassing what you are merely familiar with, or have become skilled at painting. It embraces everything visible, and ***that*** means the whole world! (It does help though if those people, places, and things can remain reasonably still long enough to be painted!)

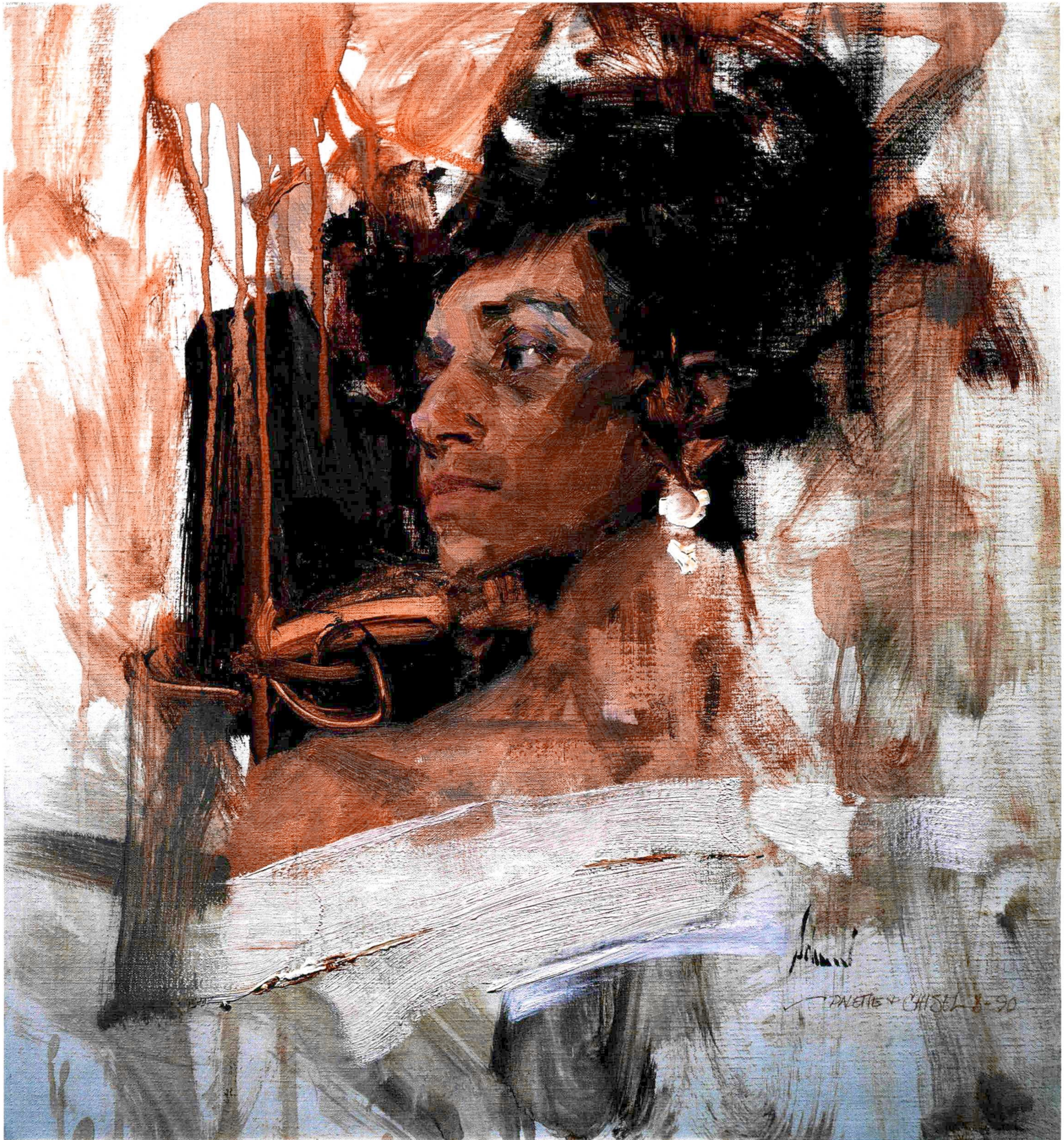
When we do a Direct Painting from life, we use the exact shapes of color that light creates on a subject to create a faithful illusion of what we physically see (provided the vision areas in our brains invert the images, because the lenses in our eyes turn everything upside down). The procedure requires that our visual world be viewed as a kind of vertical jigsaw puzzle—a flat, two-dimensional arrangement of coherent shapes, each with a specific color, value, and a set of edges—very much like what we experience by sitting too close to a big movie screen.

A Direct Painting is almost always done from life with wet paint into wet, and usually in one painting session. Ordinarily it means finishing in a single day or less, though with larger and more complex works the process can take much longer. The object is to capture a subject as it is before any noticeable changes occur in it, to it, or in the artist—like a very slow motion snapshot done by hand. (Forgive the analogy.) For larger and more elaborate paintings where changes in the subject are unavoidable or greater time is required (such as the large formal portraits by Sargent and others), there are easy ways to prepare the brushwork edges where one session has ended so the next session can continue the wet-into-wet look. These methods are discussed in Chapter Six.

With Direct Painting there are several similar ways, but no exact set way to go about it—no do-it-by-the-numbers sequence of laying in colors, because it is a way of ***seeing*** rather than a technique. I have several favorite ways of starting and finishing a Direct Painting, which I describe and illustrate in the following chapter.

With this way of working it is to a greater or lesser extent a unique situation with every new subject. In a sense, Direct Painting is the most interactive form of representational painting, because the subject and its characteristics, the painting environment, and ***you***, act together. You are not simply a casual observer using a routine or tried-and-true method to record something. Each painter of this genre has his or her own favorite routine. Cecilia Beaux, Wayman Adams, and Elizabeth Sparhawk-Jones, for example, all had their own ways and produced individualistic results, but each was a Direct painter. After my initial training in painting, I arrived at my own varied way of doing things by ***continually*** working from life. I made every blunder you can imagine, including some truly unforgettable stupidities, but I was completely hooked on this glorious way of working, and no amount of frustration or embarrassment could have stopped me.





PRINCESS oil on canvas, 20 x 21, 1990

THE WAY I WORK

While Direct painting lacks a rigidly structured step-by-step procedure, the various ways of doing it involve the same basic essentials. There is no question in my mind that the first indispensable requirement when I paint from life is having a clear mental image of the picture I wish to end up with. Without it there can be no art in my effort. It doesn't have to be a detailed brushstroke by brushstroke plan, but I *must* know what I am shooting for, just as clearly as I *must* know what I wish to say to you as I write this sentence. (Otherwise you might wonder if they taught English at my grammar school.)

My mental image must be a painted image, not simply an urge to paint something because I like it, or because I have a picture in my mind of things with names (like tree, flower, politician, drug lord, tsunami, etc.). I must resist the natural inclination to view my subject as tangible stuff. I must be able to see everything as bits and masses of color with distinctive shapes and edges joining gracefully with adjoining shapes. This is the seminal key to Direct painting—*seeing color and light instead of actual named things*.

Also, because there is usually a limited time period to paint, I must have a disciplined, almost businesslike pace of working. Once, after a particularly spirited performance of the Brahms Piano Quintet, a famous lady gleefully remarked to me: "*That's how Brahms should be played, businesslike!*" I always liked that, as long as it wasn't *too* businesslike. I must get the important things on the canvas without delay, yet not in haste. I need my materials ready and conveniently laid out so I may proceed without interruption. Once I begin, I must concentrate, measure things carefully, and stay in control. I must work with the same painstaking intent as a cat stalking its prey.

I like to begin with a turpentine wash to eliminate the pristine white of the canvas (see Starting, Chapter Three, page 68), then indicate with a few lines the placement of the subject within the picture area. In most cases, I start in the spot where I want my focal point and immediately put down one color shape correctly (exactly the way I want it—no haphazard sketching). I make sure I get the next bit of color just as accurate, and then the third, and so forth.

I try to suppress the urge to speed up, but instead do my work at a very careful and deliberate pace. I concentrate on one spot at a time, comparing my current brushstroke to the prior one for accuracy, all the while resisting the temptation to streak around the canvas like a maniac with a lot of speculative color. My bullish intention remains to move from one correctly painted patch to the next, never leaving the one I am working on until it is "right" relative to what is already there (which I made sure was right too). For one reason or another, it occasionally doesn't work out exactly that way, but at least it's what I shoot for, and the results in most cases fall reasonably within my hopes.

Errors happen of course; in my case, mainly from working too fast—trying to get too much on my canvas all at once (or the damn phone ringing). That causes carelessness in measuring for the drawing—making the little shapes of color the wrong shape. Usually I mess up when I'm trying to show off, so I have no good excuse (only the consequences of cockiness). In my normal, rather demure state, however, I enter into a finish-as-I-go-along process after the first few strokes. That means I can stop at any point and still have something worthwhile. I like that option because stopping in the early stage of a painting is frequently a good thing. Many strongly painted but less finished works are more interesting thanks to the implied power in the sureness and accuracy of what is there. In painting, as in many things in life, less can be better than more. Michelangelo's unfinished *Slave* is a perfect example.

SMOOTH SAILING

The pleasure in this way of working is by trying not to leave an error on the canvas, I avoid the agony of getting into trouble and wasting precious time with correcting. Instead, I can enjoy the concentration of putting increasingly precise elements on my canvas. It may sound difficult, but the cumulative effect of all that "rightness" happening is that painting actually gets easier as I go along because the correct work already on my canvas practically tells me what to do next.

Another welcome thing about it is that I have a picture that looks authentic from the very start—which means I don't have to wait until the end to see if anything good is going to turn out. I can view my canvas at almost any stage of completion and know how much or little I must do before I have a picture worthy of signing. Best of all perhaps, there is usually a point early on when I know for sure if I have a winner or not.

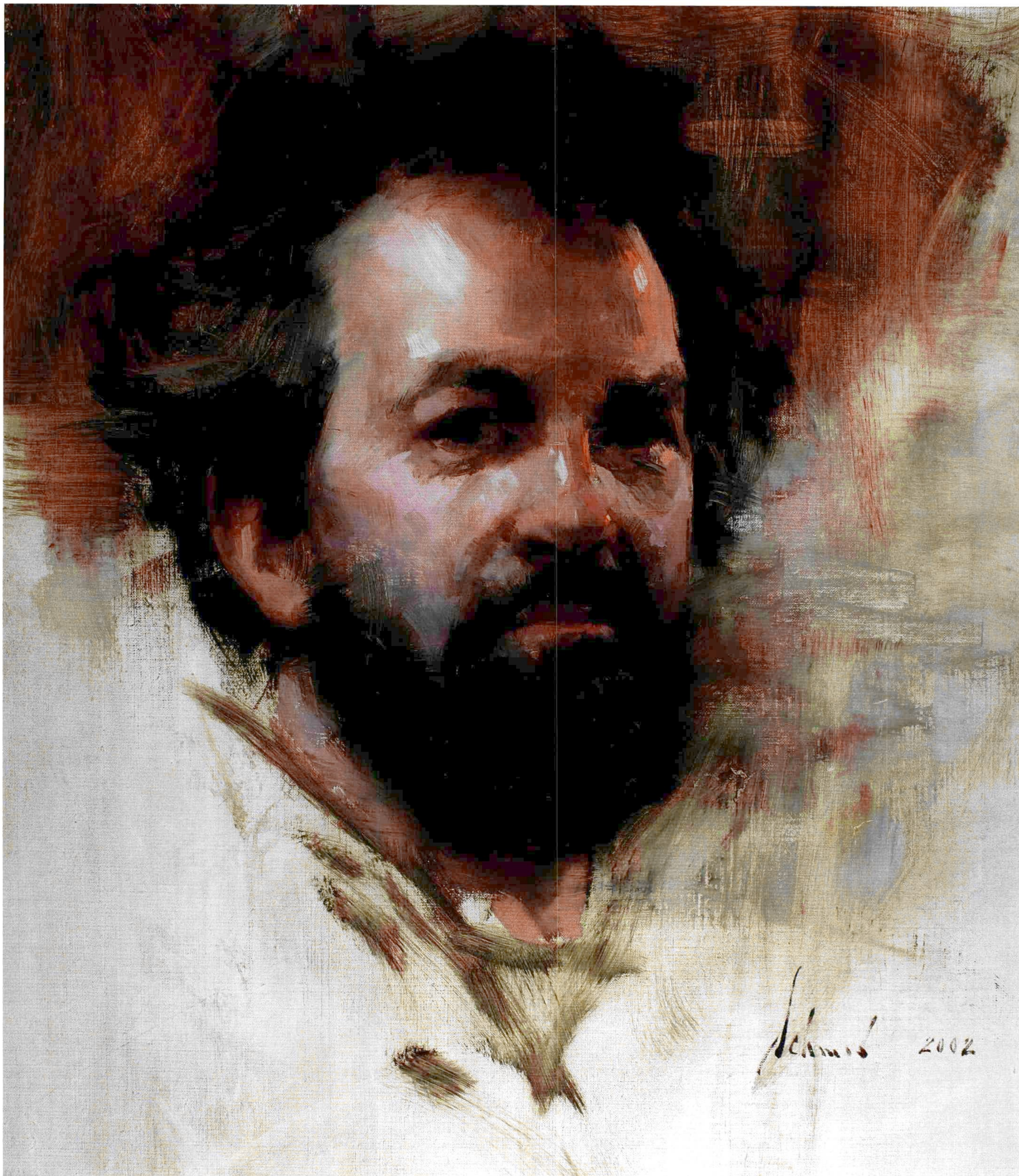
This discipline works well because it makes sense, and I promise you it is pure pleasure to watch it unfold. By comparing all ongoing brushstrokes to the ones already on my canvas (which I have made darn sure are correct), any ensuing mistakes will ring an alarm as soon as they are made, as opposed to making comparisons to approximate, half-right, or outright wrong strokes. In that unfortunate situation I would not know if I was correct or not, because there would be nothing "right" to compare it to!

I know there exists a romantic notion that painting should be a passionate struggle, but I don't believe it means we have to suffer as we work. I think painting can be uproariously passionate and still be smooth flowing and precise at the same time. Naturally, painting will always present problems, but rather than fighting them, I can use my discipline and experience to meet the challenge. By reducing complications to the only truly manageable factors—drawing, values, edges, colors—they can always be resolved. I get a kick out of being right! (Who doesn't?) In addition to having control, I can also savor the cheery thought that if my painting cannot be completed for some reason—if the model runs off to Bulgaria with Ivan before the painting session ends, or I suddenly drop dead—I can rest in the great hereafter, anxiety free, with the assurance that what I left behind was probably correct.



CARNATIONS (Detail), oil on panel, 9 x 14, 1980

Carnations are a pleasure to paint. They are also among the easiest blossoms to capture. As in this little sketch above, and the little study on page 52, their simple shapes offer endless opportunities for palette knife renderings. You might think using a palette knife a bit heavy handed for painting things as delicate as flower petals, but that is not true. Used skillfully, the knife is not only more than the equal of a brush, it can also be used to create effects beyond the reach of any brushes. A single clean knife stroke can reveal color purity and intensity unmatched by any other tool of application.



THE PROFESSOR oil on canvas, 18 x 16, 2002

DOING IT

In Direct painting, the working speed (the rate at which accurate shapes accumulate) should only be as fast as controlled precision will allow. Joaquín Sorolla's achievements seem to be an exception. Bill Mosby, after seeing him paint at Chicago's Art Institute, was fond of relating stories to me of how Sorolla worked. It was said he "painted like a pig eats," referring of course not to his manners but to the voraciousness with which he dispatched his canvases. (Probably no degree of passionate dedication to anything can equal that of a pig to his meal.) The often repeated remark about Sorolla was apparently true, judging from other accounts related by his students, who were reportedly seen to weep openly after seeing him paint.

Sorolla's speed and energy, however, could only have been possible because of his training, his superb discipline, and his experience—the kind of experience during which great demands were constantly made upon his training. Those demands must have triggered an exponential expansion of his knowledge. It is interesting to observe a similar kind of learning in other high achievers. I liken it to something like compound interest, where, for reasons not understood, a point is reached where someone of promise leaps ahead and starts producing at the level of a genius.

Sorolla and his like aside, for most of us, some parts of any painting can obviously be done quickly, while other sections need more time. This will vary with the intricacy of your subject, the size of a work, how detailed you wish to paint, and the level of your skill. When you are painting out-of-doors, many factors of weather, light, and other circumstances can affect the rate of working. Sometimes it is necessary to spend considerable time in a critical area to get it just right, but the payoff is in the time saved avoiding corrective painting. Getting things right is always more important than simply finishing a painting.

There are no demands for elaborate or sophisticated brushwork with Direct painting, but if you want to show off, you can. Zorn and Sargent were notably fussy about how they put the paint on, and delighted in cocky flourishes—so much so their dexterity is often the first thing noticed. However, they did it with such consummate skill that we delight in their bravado. Painters like Serov, Henri, and Twachtman simply didn't care about surface technique, and (to me) their work is somewhat stronger for it. The whole point of Direct painting is to depict faithfully what *you* see, not to demonstrate your cleverness with a brush or knife. Your power is in how critically you observe your subject, and the patience and care with which you paint it. Authority does not lie in how tricky you can throw the paint around. In any case, Direct painting is usually done as an "Alla Prima" (one session) rendering, and there is rarely time to be cute about the way you apply paint. Use any application familiar and comfortable to you. Paint thick or thin, with a knife or brush, use a rag, a shovel, or your fingers, it doesn't matter—whatever gets the job done. Just make sure that these five things happen:

1. That the paint is going onto the right **PLACE** on the canvas.
2. That your brushstrokes are the right **SHAPE** and **SIZE**.
3. That they are the right **COLORS**.
4. That they are the right **VALUES**.
5. That the **EDGES** of color shapes have appropriate softness or hardness.

WHAT YOU SEE AND WHAT YOU KNOW

Theoretically, and I stress *only* theoretically, Direct painting demands no special knowledge of a subject other than its visual characteristics. The task you face when you pick up a brush is pretty much the same whether you are painting a bowl of apples or the Queen of England. Carolus-Duran, Sargent's teacher, felt it was unnecessary to have any familiarity with a subject. According to him, a painter merely needed a well trained eye. Sargent himself went even further, saying artists should not show how much they know about their subject, and better still, should know nothing whatever about what they are painting. He stressed a focus solely on the *appearance* of things. The whole idea was about being more objective in painting just shapes of color.

Before you get nervous now, let me point out that what they were talking about was only a hypothetical ideal. They were saying if your "eye" is perfect, all you need to do is faithfully copy the patchwork of reflected colors which make things visible. I can't argue with the theory because the reasoning is perfectly valid, but the reality of painting is another story. To begin with, no one (yet) is perfect. Furthermore, it is unlikely you will *not* know at least something about what or who you are painting. Finally, you can bet the farm that in actual practice, the Masters (including Sargent and his teacher) relied on every last scrap of their experience and knowledge of their subjects to help them paint.

It is obviously impossible to *not* know what you already *do* know. It is also foolish, if not a bit stupid, to ignore helpful and available information. (It was one of the big mistakes the thinkers behind Modern art made when they repudiated the highly developed art of the past, and why Modern art was never taken seriously by the general public.) Anyone who has ever painted the human figure appreciates that understanding the curves and bumps on a nude model is a big help in painting what they look like. A basic understanding of anatomy and typical human proportions is crucial to figure painting. The same is true for other subjects.

Our knowledge of what we are looking at gives us an understanding of *why* our subjects look the way they do. After all, while light is all we can see, the shapes and substances it strikes create the myriad shapes of the reflected colors we see as we paint. Recognizing and understanding what we see provides us with valuable shortcuts by telling us *what to look for*. Our knowledge also helps us make convincing changes where we want them, and it guides us through ambiguous or confusing visual areas. The caution is to avoid over-reliance on what you know a thing *is* instead of what it *looks like*—if the grass in your landscape looks purple, paint it purple, not green!

Each time you start a new work, you bring to your effort everything you have learned (and not learned) from every other painting you have ever done. Unfortunately, it also includes any bad habits or misinformation you may possess. Those are learned too. The books you read, the formal training you have had, your access to great paintings, all (should) come into play automatically. Having certain information in advance, the basic proportions of the human head for example, saves you from figuring them out each time you do a portrait study. Even though average proportions rarely match any face precisely, they act as a valuable reference point from which to gauge the individual variants. An understanding of perspective is obviously an advantage in landscape painting, and a grasp of color mixing certainly broadens your ability to see and identify color.

Your experience and learning are indispensable in tricky situations—like when the subject moves or when the light changes. So, while Direct painting rests upon capturing the shapes of color on your subject, your aggregate knowledge is working for you as well. Somewhere in the mysterious recesses of your mind, it is all there. You could not avoid including this knowledge in your technical decisions if you wanted to. Just remember: knowledge can never be complete. Therefore, use it as a tool, not as a rigid set of rules. Above all, listen to what nature tells you. Clearly, your experience and knowledge give you a powerful advantage in whatever you do, but in the end, things will *always* look the way they do regardless of whether or not their appearance agrees with what you have learned about what they *ought* to look like.

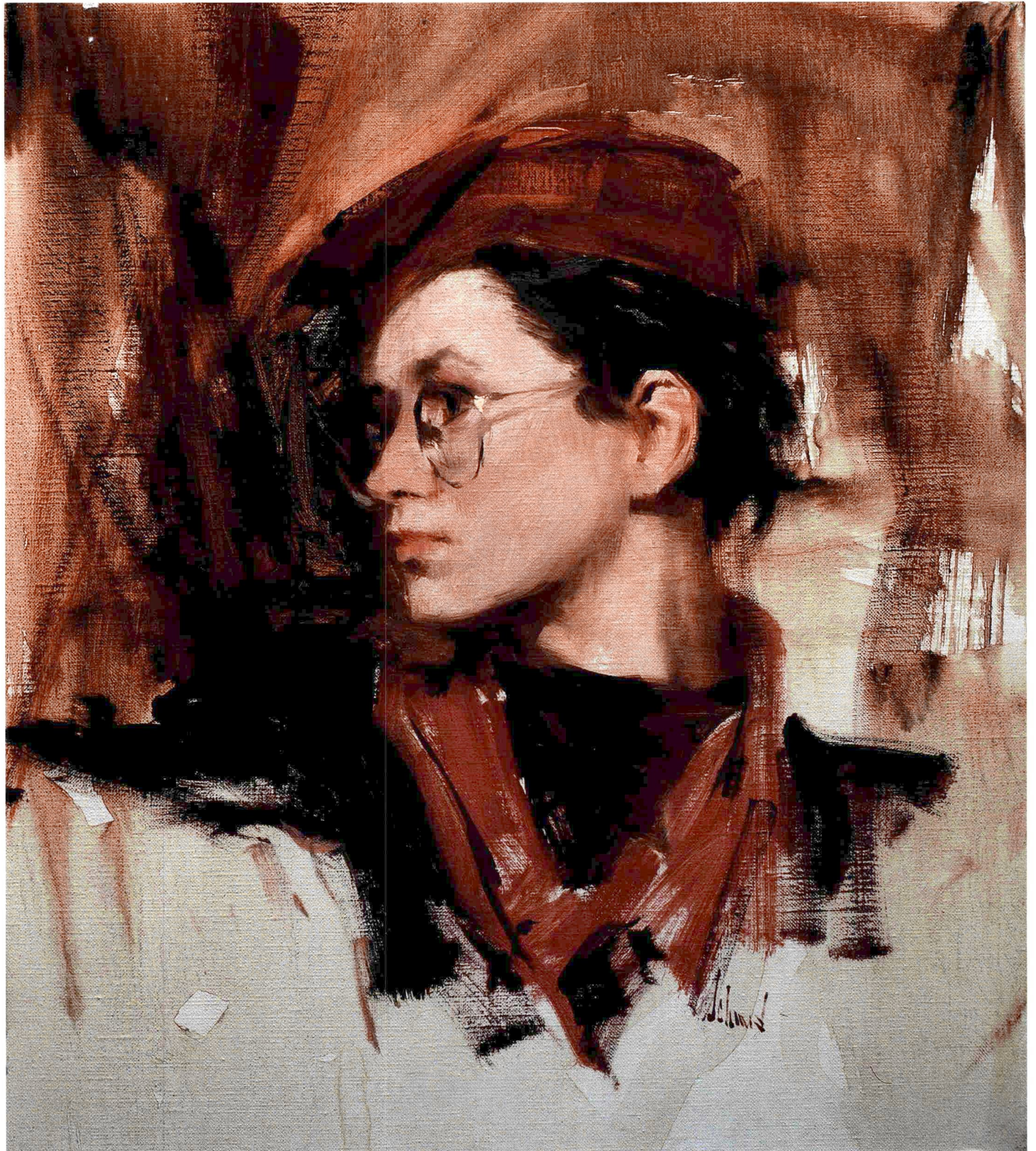
KIM oil, 18 x 16, 1998

This one-evening sketch, done in 1988 at the Palette and Chisel Academy in Chicago reminds me of the debt we all owe to the great Masters of brushwork (as distinguished from the colorists) of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In my mind the period from about 1850 or so through the 1920s was as rich in both technical and artistic achievement as any that came before.

With this and many other similar studies I came to understand and eventually master my own procedures and sequences of paint application necessary to execute paintings such as this.

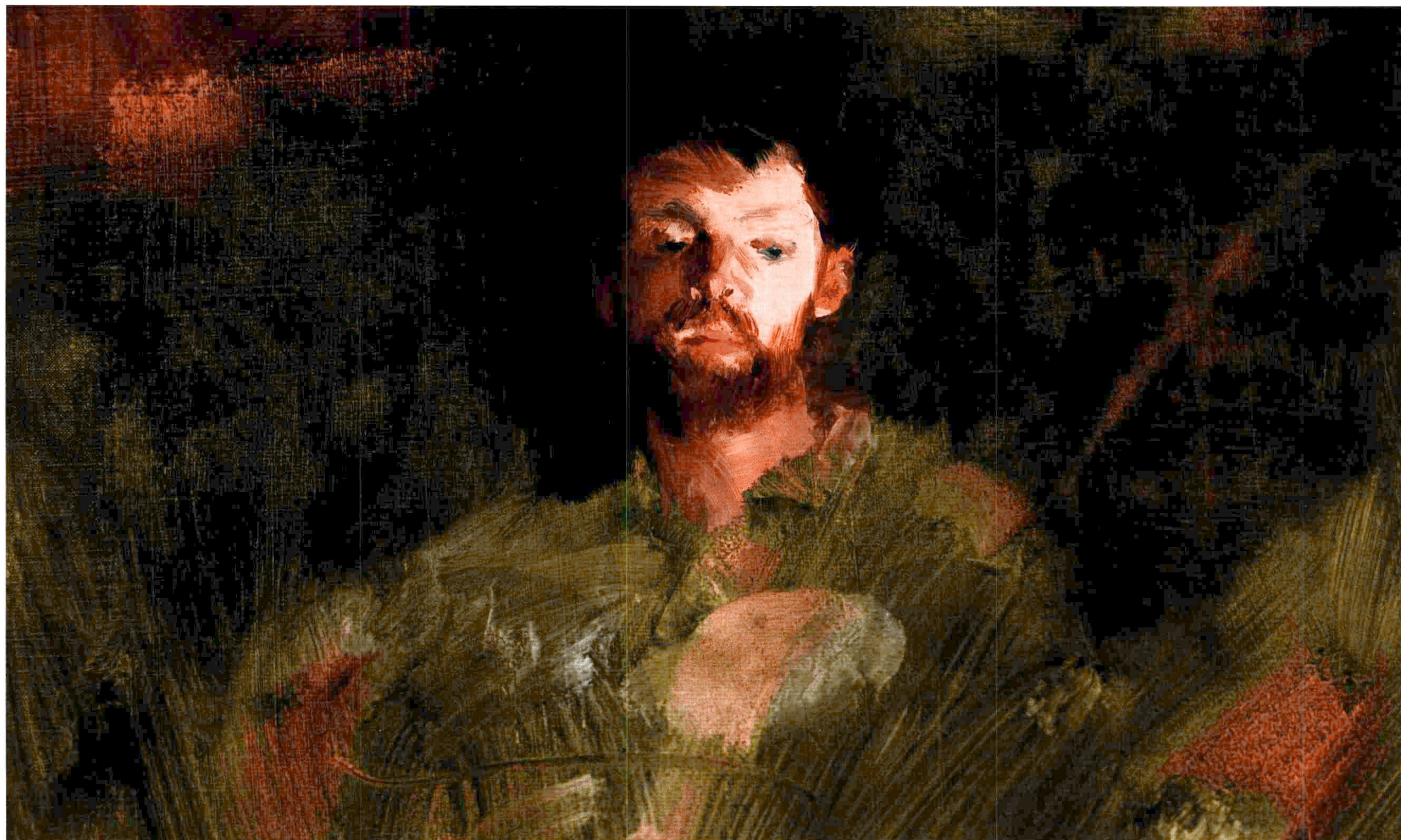
Not the least of the lessons I absorbed was that this kind of painting had to be learned under the time and circumstantial pressures of working from real life, and that the knowledge gained was far beyond any rules or special methods. It was driven instead by certain ideas and logical principles.

The greatest lesson—the one I offer constantly in this book—is that painting from life itself is the greatest teacher of all. It is rather like sex or lethal combat in that there is simply no substitute for the real thing.

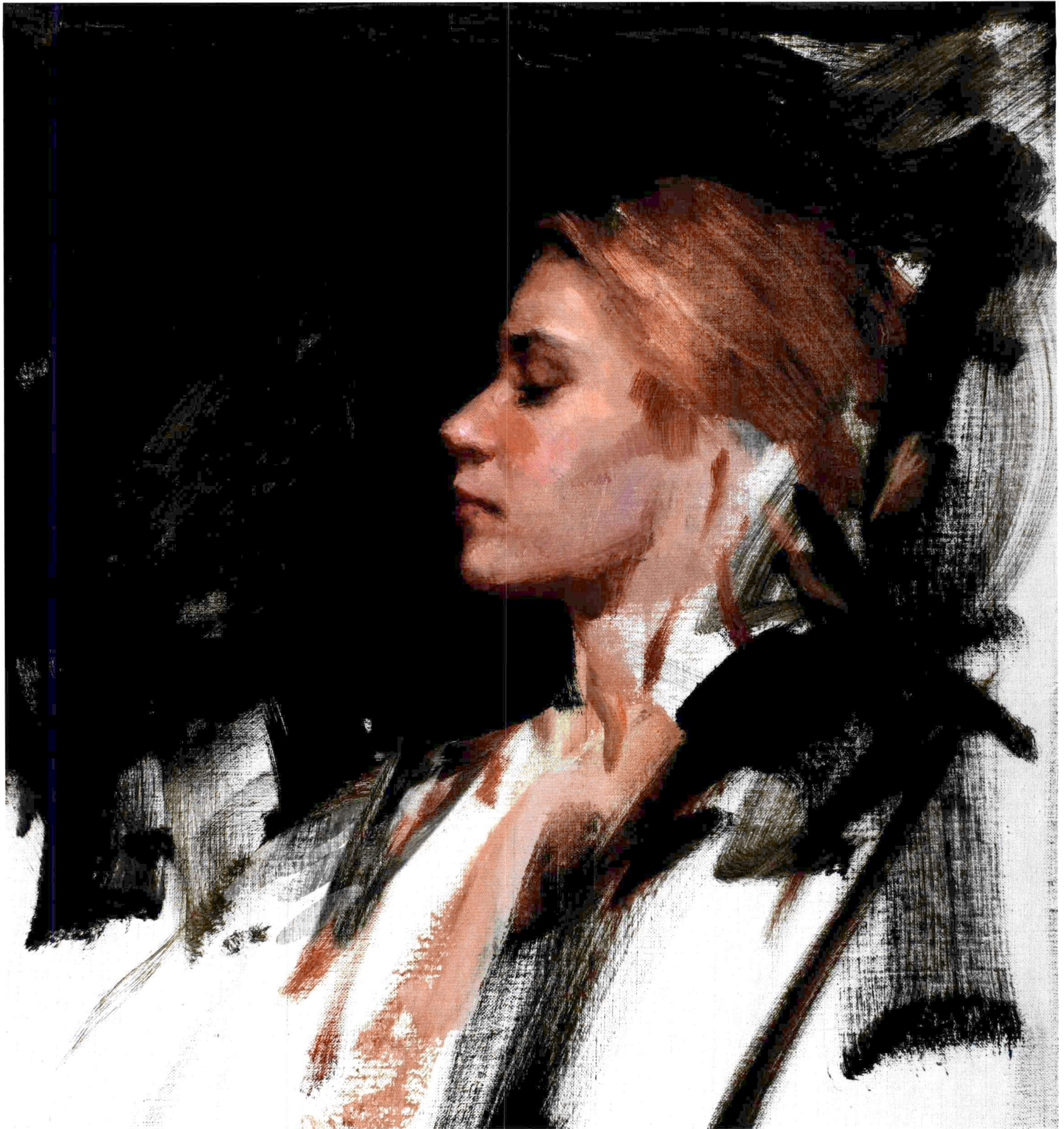


What I have written in this chapter is only a brief description of the history and evolution of Direct painting. There is far more to it, as you shall learn once I go into the working elements in depth. While each chapter ahead will explore and explain one of the vital constituents of this way of painting, I will also stress that each element, each component, is part of a larger whole, and the parts—Drawing, Values, Color, Edges, and Design—overlap and interact with one another in fascinating ways, much like the instruments in a symphony orchestra. I believe the chapter on Edges is unique. As far as I know, there is no other treatise extant or in preparation that explains their nature and function in painting. Everything I write of course will all be from my point of view, but remember, mine isn't the only one. What I present is also based on the training I received and the lessons so clearly offered in the works of the great Masters of this art. The variety and styles of Direct painting are endless, and what I have outlined so far is only the spirit and partial substance of it. **It is a very simple idea—reduce your subjects to their essential visual shapes, and paint them as accurately as you can, nothing more than that, but it gave rise to some of the most joyful painting in all of history.**

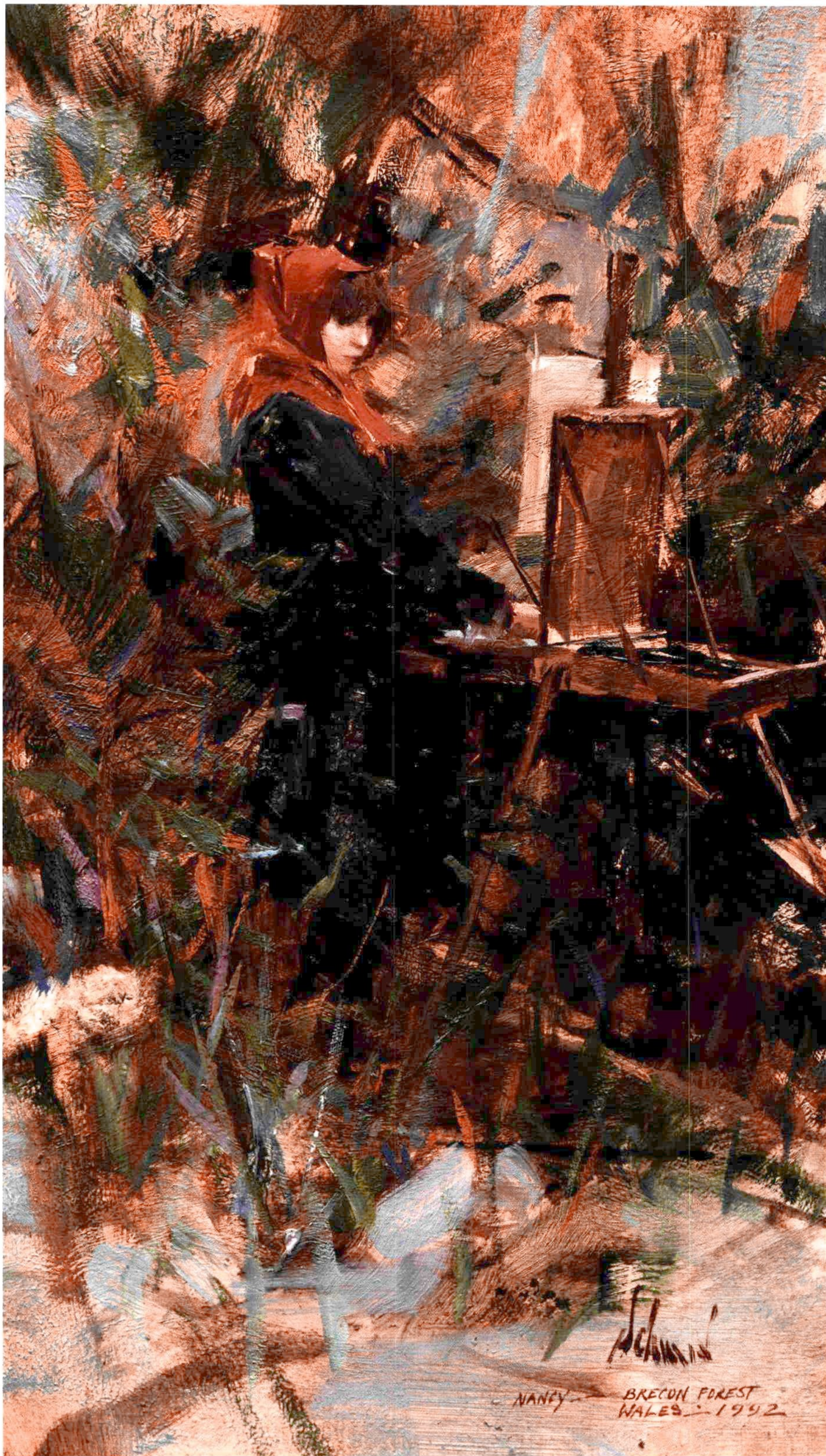
ALWAYS TRY TO REMEMBER: IF THERE IS EVER A CONFLICT IN YOUR MIND BETWEEN WHAT YOU KNOW AND WHAT YOU ARE *ACTUALLY* SEEING—PAINT WHAT YOU SEE—BECAUSE IF YOU DON'T, THE RESULT WILL LOOK LIKE SOMETHING THAT *ISN'T* THERE.



JAKE oil on canvas, 10.5 x 14.5 (Detail of unfinished stage), 2011



KATIE SWATLAND oil on canvas, 18 x 16, 2009 (Detail of unfinished stage, and *no*, she did not cut her ear off.)



NANCY PAINTING IN BRECON FOREST oil on panel, 18 x 10, 1992



The photo above shows some of my set up on the day Nancy and I visited the beautiful Brecon Forest in Wales. As you can see, I am quite far along in my painting. I recall that we spent a full morning working together. Nancy was painting across the brook from me, just out of sight of this photo.

This is a good picture to place at the beginning of this chapter on Starting because I followed my own advice and went through the checklist of thoughts you will read in the following pages before I laid a brush to my canvas. I had enough time. The light was good. I had a good vantage point from which to set up. Most importantly of all, as you can see, I had a perfect subject before me, so I knew almost to the brushstroke how I wanted to paint Nancy.

I had such a clear picture of what I wanted to see as my final painting that it was almost as if I were copying something already painted in my mind. To add frosting to the cake, Nancy also did a splendid sketch, so she was in a cheery mood later (as always) at the Pub where we celebrated.

So this is my personal, if somewhat different, story of the tale of Little Red Riding Hood and the Big Bad Wolf.

CHAPTER THREE—STARTING

THE BIG MOMENT!!

The things you do at the start of a painting (from life or otherwise) will determine, or at least greatly affect, the entire course of your work. They will make the difference between an achievement or an ordeal. This chapter is about taking effective control right away. It is never enough just to be in the throes of inspiration, or to "just feel like painting something today." Before you lift a brush, take some time to actually *think* about what you intend to do. Notice certain necessary things, make a few pointed decisions, and *only then* start painting.

On one occasion while painting with the artist Jeremy Lipking, I watched him do nothing at the beginning of our session but sit quietly and intently, just *looking* at our subject. He sat immobile for a good half hour before he went into action. When asked later, he said he was sketching his painting in his mind first—this from one of the finest painters of his generation.

Think of yourself as being at the start of a beautiful journey with some ordinary realities lying ahead. If it were a real trip, perhaps in a car going across country, you would want to have maps, credit cards, gas, enough time, and a destination. Of course, you must know how to drive; above all, you must have a route. You must have a path to get where you wish to go.

Starting a painting is much the same.

You must have paints and brushes, etc., a time and place to paint, enough skill to render what you are going to do, and the all important path—*a clear idea*—a mental image, not necessarily in elaborate detail, in your mind of the picture you are going to create, and an understanding of *why* you chose to do so.

YOUR TOOLS

Be prepared! All of your gear should be in a state of readiness beforehand so you can concentrate on painting and not be fussing around while your passion to paint is at full gallop. Choose your brushes as you would choose weapons before battle. Make certain they are clean and the bristles well-shaped. Have your palette set up beforehand with plenty of fresh paint. And don't be stingy with it—if you're going to paint like you really *mean* it, you'll never do it with teensy-weensy little squeezings of color on your palette. Make sure your turpentine, mineral spirits (or water if you are a watercolorist), are clean and ample. Have plenty of rags or paper towels handy. Make sure your easel is sturdy, and if you are outdoors, that it is well-anchored and not wobbly.

WHEN ALL SYSTEMS ARE READY, RELAX AND TAKE A DEEP BREATH. THEN APPROACH YOUR CANVAS WITH THE SAME RELISH AS YOU WOULD YOUR LOVER OR A SUMPTUOUS MEAL. NEVER BE AFRAID.

YOUR SUBJECT

When you first confront your subject, make sure it is what you want. It may seem to be a problem if you are in an art school, or painting group, and you are not in charge. A teacher or class monitor might be arranging the subject, posing the model, or selecting a landscape. That was the case when I was in art school. I found that respectful suggestions from myself or others about the pose or background were usually welcomed, as long as they did not negatively affect the view of other students. Bear in mind only a few painting setups in art school or painting groups are great from *every* angle—hence the term "art school pose." There are only a few ways a model can stand or sit and look great from every point in a room. Remember too, teachers usually have a specific reason, a drawing or color problem for example, they want you to confront and learn about. In any case, whatever situation you find yourself in, examine the subject carefully to see if anything about it bothers you. If it does (and if you can), politely suggest changes or move to a better viewpoint. Trust me, it's always best to keep the peace in a classroom.

If you are still unhappy with the teacher's choice (and he or she is a really competent teacher), just bite the bullet and try your best. It might be the teacher sees something you do not *yet* see, and only by having a go at painting it, will you learn to see it, and thereby be aware of something new (The *ah-ha* experience).

Scan your subject for things clearly impossible. After all, paint isn't magic! For one thing it can't emit light or glow in the dark. Paint only *reflects* light, and even then only certain wavelengths of it. Though we can paint the *effect* of light sources such as fire, electric lights, electronic sources, lightning, thermonuclear detonations, or the sun, we can never ever match their *actual* brightness. Van Gogh, among others, vainly tried painting the sun itself, perhaps without knowing its true brightness was beyond the range of his paints.

So, if you see that certain elements in the subject are outside the limits of your pigments, such as extremes of color saturation, brightness or darkness, try to form an idea beforehand of how you are going to handle those areas when you get to them. Workable compromises of one kind or another are always possible. There are numerous ingenious, if not downright foxy, ways to paint the *effect or simulation* of light and color without the frustration of attempting the impossible.

In the urgency to "get going" with a painting, it is tempting to leave those solutions for later, but don't let it happen. Try to have a pretty good idea of what you must do *before* you do it! (The way a good trial lawyer knows the answer to a question before he asks it of a witness.) I am not suggesting you must be able to visualize your eventual painting in complete detail, only that you scrutinize your subject at the beginning for potential problems or tasks, and either come up with answers, or make changes. If that doesn't work, it's a good idea that you at least know there are answers out there you can access when the time comes.

I can trace many of my more memorable failures back to the beginnings of many paintings where I rushed into them just to get going, only to discover later that in my blind haste I hadn't the slightest idea of how I was going to handle certain key areas. My focus was entirely on my main focal point of interest. The sin I committed most often (with a great many variations) went something like this: (1) I'd see a sweet old Victorian house begging to be painted. (2) I'd start painting it as quickly as possible ignoring all else. (3) As I worked, I'd begin to notice several modern cars, a large beer truck, and a boring concrete street in what was to be my foreground! And Dear Lord, a shiny, boring, stainless steel office building behind the sweet old Victorian for my background! (4) You don't want to know the rest of this, it's mostly about doing a lot of faking.

THE MORAL: RUDE SURPRISES ARE NO FUN JUST WHEN THINGS ARE GOING NICELY.....



FLOWERS AND CHEESE (Detail), oil on panel, 10 x 18



JODY oil on canvas, 18 x 22, 1988



STUDY OF JODY conté on paper, 18 x 22, 1988

Above are two studies of the same model. The full color oil sketch was done from life in one session. It has always been a favorite of mine because the work went very smoothly, and I believe I caught her introspective mood. With the use of some quiet brushwork and restrained color, I feel I succeeded in focusing attention on Jody rather than my technique.

As sometimes happens, the life sketch suggested a drawing as well, which I did here using my painting as my source. The overall design, value patterns, and textures were ideal for a conté tone drawing. A tone drawing uses the value shapes on a subject rather than lines, although lines are often introduced to give a more drawing-like effect, as Nicolai Fechin did in most of his charcoals. Many of his sketches are probably best described as modeled (or shaded) line drawings of the kind favored for anatomy life classes, including the ones I attended for several years at the American Academy.

I used a standard warm tinted charcoal 100% rag paper, and several shades of red earth conté crayons and pencils to render the image.

ANALYZE

If you are happy with your subject, and there are no serious questions about it remaining in your mind, do a simple analysis of what is in front of you. It is not enough just to see what color eyes and hair the model has, and then start. Before you begin any painting, have a clear grasp of the distribution of *light* on the subject. Notice its overall direction, and its temperature, which is sometimes not so easy (until you read Chapter Seven). Start by asking yourself critical questions such as the following:

1. Which side of your subject is lightest or darkest? This may seem simple, but in landscape painting, or situations with multiple light sources, such as interiors or city scenes, it is not always obvious.

2. Is the light clear and sharp (as on a sunny day), or diffused (such as a gray overcast day)? Are there strong cast shadows or are they softly modeled? Look at the edges of the shadows for that. Bright light by itself will not necessarily produce hard edges unless the light source is concentrated from a point like the sun or a strong spotlight. Is there any strong reflected light bouncing around?

3. Where are the lightest light areas, the darkest darks, the sharpest edges, the completely "lost" edges? This is particularly important in establishing the range of values and edges in a painting. (Chapter Five and Six.)

4. How warm or cool is the light? Are the shadows warmer or cooler than the lighter areas on the subject? For a simple little trick to identify color temperature see page 203 in Chapter Seven on Color.

5. Where are the most powerful (pure) colors? And what are they—bright red, pure yellow, violet, vibrant blue, etc....? Identify them and plan to use them as soon as possible in your start. The same goes for the dominant light and dark areas. Why? Because the fact they *are* so easily recognized means it will be easy to get them right, and the more right things you can establish makes the less identifiable colors easier to recognize simply by comparing them to the correct colors already in place.

6. Is there an obvious color harmony in the subject as a whole, or is the harmony subtle, as in daylight? (Chapters Seven and Nine.) Is the harmony created by the light *amplified* by related local colors in the subject? (This happens often with snow and water and other brightly colored areas in your subject. Light reflected from strong local color can have a dominant influence on overall color harmony.

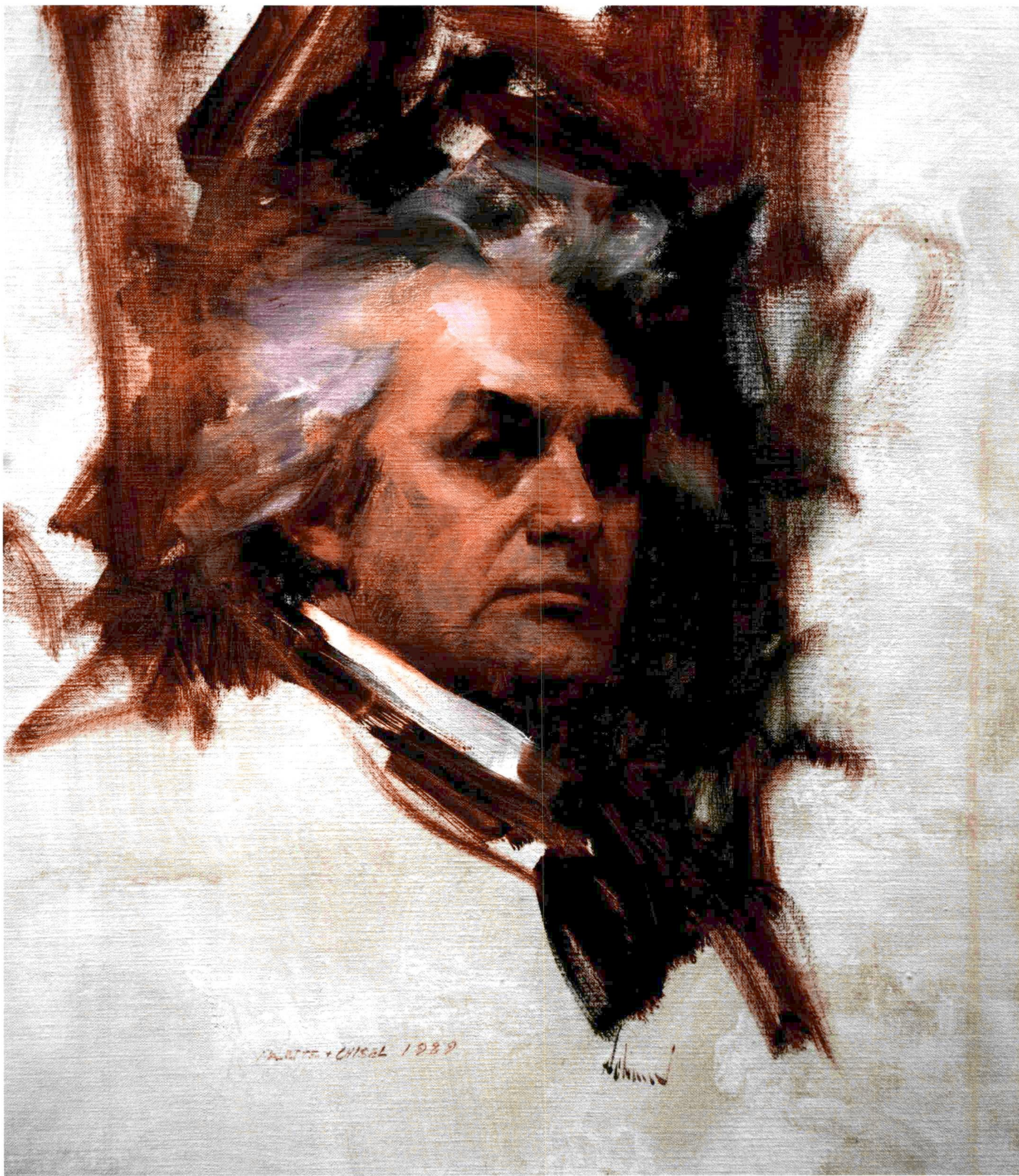
For example, I was once driving through Kansas at a time when the wheat crop was a wonderful golden yellow ready for harvest—mile after endless mile of the stuff, waiting to become my bread or breakfast cereal. There was a low overcast hovering above the fields, and the color of the wheat reflected upward causing a golden glow in the entire sky. *That*, in turn diffused everywhere into the landscape making Kansas look like something out of a Hollywood religious epic movie. Even Dorothy and Toto would have been impressed! I did not stop to paint it of course because *that* color, like the unbelievable azure blue of the Mediterranean, was far too intense (for me) to be credible in a painting.

Most instances of local color bouncing around are far less dramatic. The most frequent are light from a person's collar or shirt reflecting upward to lighten shadows on his or her face, or sunlight striking leaves on trees, causing everything around to take on a greenish cast.

7. What sort of technique do you envision? How do you want to put your paint on? Are you going to use a broken color rendering, or strong fluid brushwork, or something else? Do you intend a thickly or thinly painted rendering? Where are you going to shovel the paint on, and where do you want to keep it thin? (Chapter Eleven.)



GOLDEN LEAVES (Detail), oil on canvas, 12 x 16, 1996



This is a portrait sketch of Donald Llanuza, Fine Artist and former president of the Palette and Chisel Academy.

This is one of hundreds of portrait sketches I did at the Palette & Chisel Academy between 1984 and 1991. Most, like this work, were two or four hour studies done in a day or evening.

All were essentially just block-ins carried a few steps forward, but stopping, in most cases, short of formal portraiture.

I was doing them simply for my own pleasure and education, but I soon came to appreciate the value of painting within a group. The artists at the Academy were, and surely still are, a wonderfully eclectic bunch. Along with the friendships and fun of working with other struggling painters, I learned about our most common problems in painting from life.

Drawing was, by far, the most prevalent difficulty, though it was the least acknowledged technical fault. The lack of a well-ordered and logical starting method was the typical procedural problem. A poor start inevitably led to failure.

PRESIDENT DON oil on canvas, 20 x 18, 1989

8. Are there any drawing problems? Is there foreshortening to contend with? Are there perspective distortions, or areas of ambiguity or confusion? Is there anything in the subject that would look weird if painted?

9. Is there well-balanced light on your canvas? Daylight on a bright overcast day is best. 5000k florescent lights are OK too. Is the light going to change during the course of your session?

10. Are you going to have a problem with glare on your canvas? If so, how are you going to deal with it? Light striking your working surface at high angle from behind you is best. It's also a good idea to wear a dark shirt when working in bright conditions to minimize reflected light from yourself onto your canvas.

11. Is the subject going to change? Are your flowers going to wilt? Is the model going to have trouble resuming the pose after breaks—or fall asleep? How are you going to minimize the effects of such things?

12. Lastly (as if all of that weren't enough), consider how much of what you are looking at you really need to paint, or want to paint, or have enough time to paint properly. It is often better to paint only the parts that really interest you, and ignore the rest.

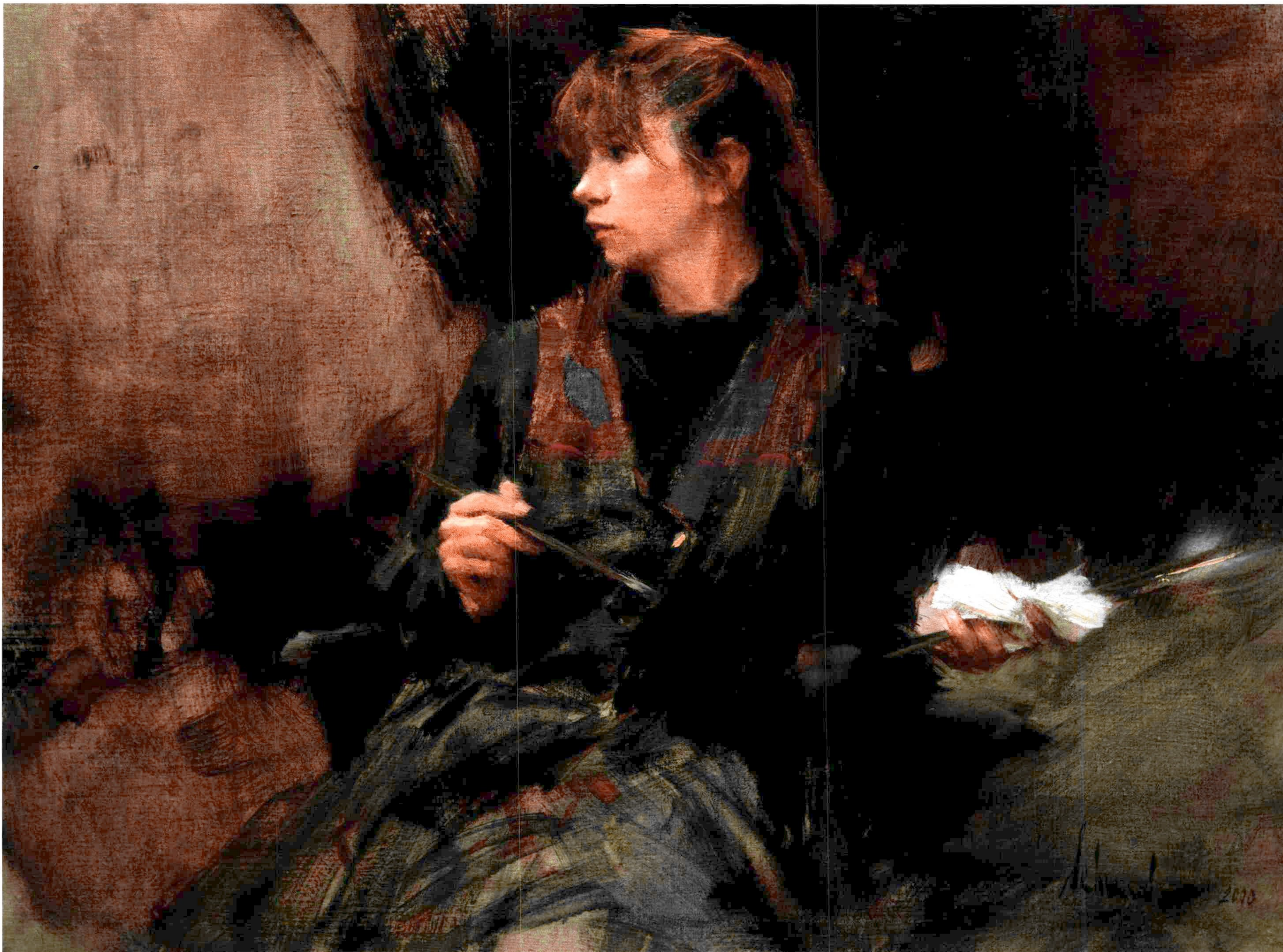
I realize I've given you quite a lot to think about before you even start! I could probably have mentioned even more, but I don't want you to get the idea you must conduct an exhaustive countdown to blast-off each time you begin a painting. After all, you cannot foresee *everything* at the outset. There is simply too much, and you might end up in a kind of paralysis. I am only suggesting you cultivate a practical and helpful *awareness routine* as you prepare to paint. Take time to notice certain important details about your subject the same way you would at the start of any familiar task. It isn't very hard to do.

We have many routines, some quite complicated, which we do rather matter-of-factly in our daily lives. Driving a car, for example, involves many small and quite easy habitual acts which, if not followed, might result in who-knows-what? We hop into our cars and ease into our routine without giving it a second thought. It is almost automatic because each little act and judgment necessary for safe driving makes very good sense. Preparing a fine meal is another example, or think of all the things you do, every little action and decision you make from the time you wake up in the morning to the moment you retire. My list prior to starting a painting will seem quite short by comparison.

The actual *seeing-mixing-applying* business of painting unfolds slowly as a brushstroke-by-brushstroke process. Each work of art demands many unpredictable decisions which can only be made *as they arise* along the way. Nevertheless, and like it or not, most of those transient decisions will be governed, or at least seriously influenced, by the few crucial choices and observations made at the start.

There really aren't many to deal with in the beginning, and with experience and discipline you will be able to take them all in with a few quick glances. It will become second nature to you—like making sure it's feet first when you get out of bed in the morning (less headaches), or checking to see if your more vital buttons are buttoned before you go out.

However, when all is said and done about preparedness, introspection, awareness, and making sure of this and that before a painting is started, my experience has been this—as soon as I have put down a few brushstrokes, the real business of doing my painting can often feel like I'm flying an airplane made of silly putty. Sometimes the *only* important thing is to put something down—anything—just to get past the inertia of indecision and hesitancy—and get into action! After all, you can't fool around asking yourself questions all day. There is a great masterpiece to be done!



NANCY PAINTING oil on canvas, 18 x 24, 2000

ZEROING IN

One good shortcut in starting is to make a decision right away about which of the visual aspects of your subject you wish to emphasize (or what combination of them). The idea is to focus more sharply on your objective and ignore things you are not interested in. To do this, ask yourself the ***all important WHY*** question—Why did you chose your subject (just liking it is not enough). Try to identify the tangible (paintable) element, and be as specific as you can:

- **Are you seeing a wonderful display of COLOR?**
- **Do you see a dramatic study in VALUES or a fascinating display of EDGES?**
- **Are you intrigued by the DRAWING—the shapes and subtle forms?**
- **Or are you more interested in the DESIGN in your subject—the relationship of masses or directional lines?**
- **Do you just wish to play around and experiment? (It's always refreshing!)**
- **Seeing a check awaiting you, if you paint only to sell, does not count.**

MAKING UP YOUR MIND

If you decide color is your goal, then don't feel you have to be so fussy about an elaborate development of the drawing or values or edges. (Color was Monet's choice.) If, on the other hand, you are intrigued by the dramatic values, or intricate drawing and opportunities for lavish brushwork, then settle for merely adequate color and concentrate your razzle-dazzle on those other qualities. (Sargent did this habitually, so did Anders Zorn.) I'm not advising you should be slipshod in the areas of secondary interest. Be accurate, but just don't go overboard with them unless you like to. It's always your choice because you are the artist!

You will not always have enough time to paint everything to its limit anyway unless you are doing a still life, but even then your painting will often be stronger if a single element predominates (as the solo part stands out in a concerto). When time is not a limiting factor, for example when circumstances allow for multiple sessions, and you have what it takes (or just for the fun of it), by all means go for as much in your subject as you please and use the full orchestra of your palette. Sorolla, like Mozart, seemed to have no limits, and both pushed their respective art to soaring heights! Shooting off cannons though is not a wise thing to do (as in Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture), not at least in your studio.

THE SEQUENCE

Don't just start smooshing pigments around. Think about the order in which you will apply your key elements. There will always be some obvious things about your subject or circumstances which will suggest a logical sequence of painting. Certainly the first considerations should be about the kind of picture you have in mind, the nature of your subject, a realistic awareness of your ability, and the time available for working. Next should come decisions about what is most important technically in your subject, and what type of underpainting you need, the preparatory work (if any), which will make your ensuing work easier to do.

Whenever I can, I paint the strongest and most obvious things in my subject first. I do the easy-to-see elements such as clear-cut shapes, distinct colors, and strong values, because it is a sure way to get correct painting on the canvas right away—and the sooner I have accurate painting in place, the easier the rest of it will be. Also, a painting always goes more smoothly if I leave the optional detail for later.

As I paint, I try to anticipate the edges to come. Here is an example that often occurs in landscape painting: Many outdoor scenes appear to have four somewhat distinct ***planes***: a foreground, middle-ground, the distance, and the sky. The order in which they are laid on can work either with me or against me. When I am starting, I usually introduce those planes in order from most distant to up close—from back to front—the sky first, then distant forms, then the middle-ground elements, and lastly the things nearest to me. I use a minimal amount of paint, scumbling it in, to avoid a build up of heavy paint layers which could just make a big thick mess. Also, I never thin my paint with mediums at this stage either because that would make a slippery thin mess.

Once those areas have been established, I can go back to paint into any spot I wish and be assured of achieving the edges I want. If, however, I paint, say, the trees first and then attempt to put the sky behind them, the opposite will happen. The resulting edges will at first make the sky appear to be in front of the trees, and a lot of time consuming brushwork will have to be done to bring the trees, or whatever, in front of the sky again where they belong! (Lord, why can't these things be easy?)

In my experience, situations like the above, where complex forms are seen against a simple, contrasting background (like a sky), call first for the background to be laid in with a thin (not thinned with medium) layer of the appropriate color, followed by the middle and foreground forms, then some repainting back and forth with each to achieve the variety of edges necessary for a three-dimensional effect.

To give another example: If I am doing a portrait and I draw the features with lines before I put on a general flesh tone, it will be awkward to paint the flesh color up to and around the features (there is almost always a natural impulse to try and save the lines). Repainting of the features will be necessary then to produce the correct edges. In nearly all cases, regardless of the subject, it is usually safer to establish the general tones first, and then paint the smaller shapes, such as facial features, into them.

These are examples of my working habits, not my rules. I don't *always* paint exactly as I have described and you shouldn't either. Be flexible—the order in which you introduce the elements of a painting should not be a rigid system. What worked last time may not work this time. You need to be flexible enough to adapt to the individual demands of each situation. Don't follow a procedure because you read it somewhere, or some artist (including me) says that's the way it should be done. It must make good sense to you, and it must apply to your circumstances.

THICK AND THIN

If you are an oil painter, there is also the consistency of paint to consider. It is a good idea to follow the old tried-and-true advice of progressing from thin paint to thick paint. (Or "fat" over "lean" as in the older references.) When I use the term *thick* I don't mean thick like you make your peanut butter sandwich or plaster a wall. I simply mean paint *in the same consistency as it comes from its tube*, undiluted with mediums or anything else, and applied in a layer sufficient to cover whatever is underneath it, but not thick enough to interfere with subsequent overpainting. Usually one half to one millimeter will do nicely.

By thin paint I mean paint scrubbed (scumbled) on in as thin a layer as possible. Thin can also mean paint thinned with a liquid medium such as turpentine, linseed oil or other oils, or any of the many painting mediums. Thick paint in the beginning stage is not necessary, and it can be maddening to work into. Save the buttery stuff for the finished top layer brushstrokes.

Moderately thicker paint over thin is also safer from the standpoint of permanency. Thin paint on top of thick is likely to crack even when working wet-into-wet. *Extremely* thick paint, however, (more than 3mm or 1/8 inch) on canvas is certain to crack even under the most favorable conditions. Normal fluctuations in temperature and humidity, and time itself will see to that. If you are fond of thick paint, do it on a more rigid support, something other than stretched canvas (such as white lead primed untempered Masonite™, or canvas board made with good quality white lead primed linen) to reduce the chance of cracking.

With Alla Prima or Direct painting, the problems of permanence that arise in other procedures are mostly avoided, because the basic method is to simply work wet into wet paint (as described above), making sure your heavier applications are done over thinner applications (which is a natural tendency anyway). This means your painting will dry as if it were *one strong single layer*.

This is far better than other methods involving multiple layers of paint applied at different times on top of other partially dried layers. Such methods increase the risk of various types of cracking, because the paint layers all dry and oxidize at different speeds with different chemical consequences. Oil paintings should receive a protective coat of final varnish, such as *Damar*, or one of the modern non-yellowing varnishes like *Soluvar*™ at least six months or so after the work is dry to the touch. Practice these few sensible ideas and you will have followed the most basic rules of permanence.

BAVARIAN DOLL oil on canvas,
14 x 12, 2004

Antique dolls are fascinating. You might think I'm rather a bit too old, not to mention the wrong gender, to regard dolls with any interest other than their high value these days.

However, from both a sociological and artistic point of view, dolls are rich subjects in many ways. Dolls are little versions of people, not so much of ourselves as such, but rather of how we choose to see ourselves.

The dolls of any period or place are little idealized renditions of the people who made them. They are also clothed and coiffured according to their contemporaneous status (just as we are).

Painting a doll is not easy. For one thing, few of them look like actual human beings. This 1870s Bavarian bisque doll with its grotesquely huge head and features, tiny hands and feet, and articulation that would break any real child's bones, is quite typical.

The faces of dolls are perplexing for me, because I must abandon all I know about realistic anatomy and proportions. Doll faces are distorted according to the period, culture, and sophistication of the maker. The really hard ones are the homemade variety, and the primitive ones.

Though they can sometimes seem spooky, dolls continue to engage me, especially the well-worn ones with only one eye left—which I know have been loved by a human child.



To further aid in the healthy longevity of your work (and yourself), it is a very good idea to have a basic understanding of the materials you work with, particularly the pigments, mediums, and solvents you use. The manufacturers of art materials offer a bewildering choice of very pretty stuff to work with. The materials of professional grade are generally excellent. Some of the rest is OK. A lot is simply unnecessary, and a small percentage is just plain awful or downright toxic. *Educate yourself* the same way you do these days about the food you eat. Know how to read the back label on a tube of paint like you do the nutrition facts on your breakfast cereal box. Know which pigments will fade away six months after you apply them, and which ones will start cracking no matter what you do.

Above all, know which of the solvents and other liquids you use might harm you over time, or spontaneously combust and burn your studio down (like linseed oil), and which are perfectly safe. All of the research you could possibly want on these matters is available today in books written in plain language for artists like us who do not have degrees in chemistry.

Of course there is even more on the Internet, but be wary. While there is a vast amount of reliable information, some of it is highly technical and written for scientific or industrial needs or other specialized readers. The Internet is also a lot of opinion, hearsay, pure speculation, theorizing, misinformation, and marketing of things you don't need. So there it is. Keep things simple, and they will likely last longer. (A good rule for life too.) I recommend some excellent books on all of this later in this book.

BRIGHT MINDS

Explore the systems of successful painters for ideas you can use. If you are fortunate enough to be able to travel, use the opportunity to visit museums to see the unfinished works of Masters. The major institutions may not show many such works because they prefer the attention (and therefore revenue) gained from finished pieces. However, if you seek out the smaller galleries or private collections, or better still the studios and homes of painters open to the public (like Sorolla's in Madrid, and others), you will find many of their paintings in various stages of completion. Study them! They are marvelous lessons in procedure because they show the sequence of working. Many institutions will take you into their storage areas and let you view smaller works and sketches not normally on view to the public if you contact them ahead of time and very politely explain that you are a serious artist with a special interest in a certain Master's work. Nancy and I had such an experience when Sorolla's granddaughter gave us a tour of the family's private collection in Madrid. We have enjoyed other such privileges in many major museums and historic places during our travels here in the United States and abroad.

See if you can figure out what great artists were after with their initial sketches, and where you think they might have taken them. Try to analyze what they did and what their problems were. Look at their smaller on-the-spot color sketches too. Sorolla loved to sketch on the backs of cigar box covers. Each one is like a miniature beginning. It is great fun to do this kind of detective work instead of just gawking at finished masterpieces. I think more can be learned from those half-starts and personal sketches than from their major works. When I look at them I can almost hear the artist thinking.





LARA oil on canvas, 16 x 19, 2003

Ah ha! You may say. All this technical stuff about learning to paint what you see and being accurate and analytical is all well and good and necessary, but what about the thing that makes art *Art*, with a capital A—the very soul of what we do, the essence of the creative, the poetic imperative! What about the aesthetic qualities to be captured in a subject? What about the spiritual mood, or the vast power in a landscape, or the expression in a person's eyes? What about tenderness, compassion, sacredness, simple beauty, tragedy, life, death, the human condition itself?

I wish I was a better writer with questions like these. Yes, there are countless ways we experience this world—ways for which we have no adequate words or rulers to measure, but which *can* be expressed in art, and perhaps *only* in art? Such moments of realization are obviously vital to us as compelling reasons to paint, but alas, none of those very personal inner experiences are to be found in paint tubes. They exist only in our minds, and in our ability to bring them to life on a canvas.

All of those wondrous intangibles are *feelings we have* about our subjects. Some of them can resonate so deeply within us we can be lifted and transported into a kind of wordless awe—a state in which for a time we can only mutely behold what is before us. That is as it should be, and we ought to jolly well be grateful we are able to have such responses to life.

But, if our special moments are to be shared and celebrated in paintings, they must be transformed into *visible forms*—things we can actually see with our eyes. As we must know by now, those *things* are various shapes of *colored light*, and those shapes must become shapes of *colored paint* before they can appear in our paintings as convincing versions of whatever it was we saw and then responded to.

For example, the look of innocent wonder we see in a child's face must be understood and rendered as a drawing matter (small shapes fitted together like a jigsaw puzzle). Why? Because they are a consequence of a specific configuration of the child's facial bones and muscles, which acting together, express her look of wonder.

Likewise, the mood in a landscape is likely to be a study in colors, values, and edges. Look closely at any picture in this book and you will note all of the images of my paintings are just lots of big and little strokes of paint representing the bits of reflected light which fit together perfectly, and thus constitute an image of my subjects, and so on. The same is true of motion pictures. All of the passionate love scenes, exploding car crashes, and the rest, are simply thousands upon thousands of bits of light, which after a complicated electronic/optical process, are projected onto a flat screen. Those little bits, together with similarly produced sound bits, can make us weep or laugh or ride a roller coaster of other emotions.

So, if we can translate our poetic insights into technical realities—into the visual elements that make things look the way they do, then it should not be difficult to determine *which* of the visual elements or combination of them in the subject are producing the artistic aspect that fascinates us.

I believe most of the Masters of painting I have revered as role models would probably agree that truly powerful and sensitive paintings from life are that way because they have a manifestly *authentic* look. In other words, whatever the subject, the moment captured and expressed through a graphic medium such as paint, appears real and true. Such pictures reflect reality for the same reason some of the great news photos of our time have become icons of the human experience. The cameraman was *there* and caught the moment unfolding. Because of my training, I understood the importance of working with as objective an eye as possible.

To do this I believe I must approach my subject as any experienced reporter is expected to do with a news event, without subjective bias and certainly without ulterior agendas such as preaching, politicizing, proselytizing, or sanctimonious value judgments. Honest, straightforward, descriptive rendering will convince and endure as nothing else will. The courage, and elegance with which this is done will do the artistic part. My comments, of course, refer only to works intended to reflect real life, and do not apply to works of imagination or similar creative sources. Personally speaking, in my work I sometimes do take great satisfaction in crossing the line of *what is*, and venture into the visual realm of *what could be*. I like to send my viewers on imagination trips.

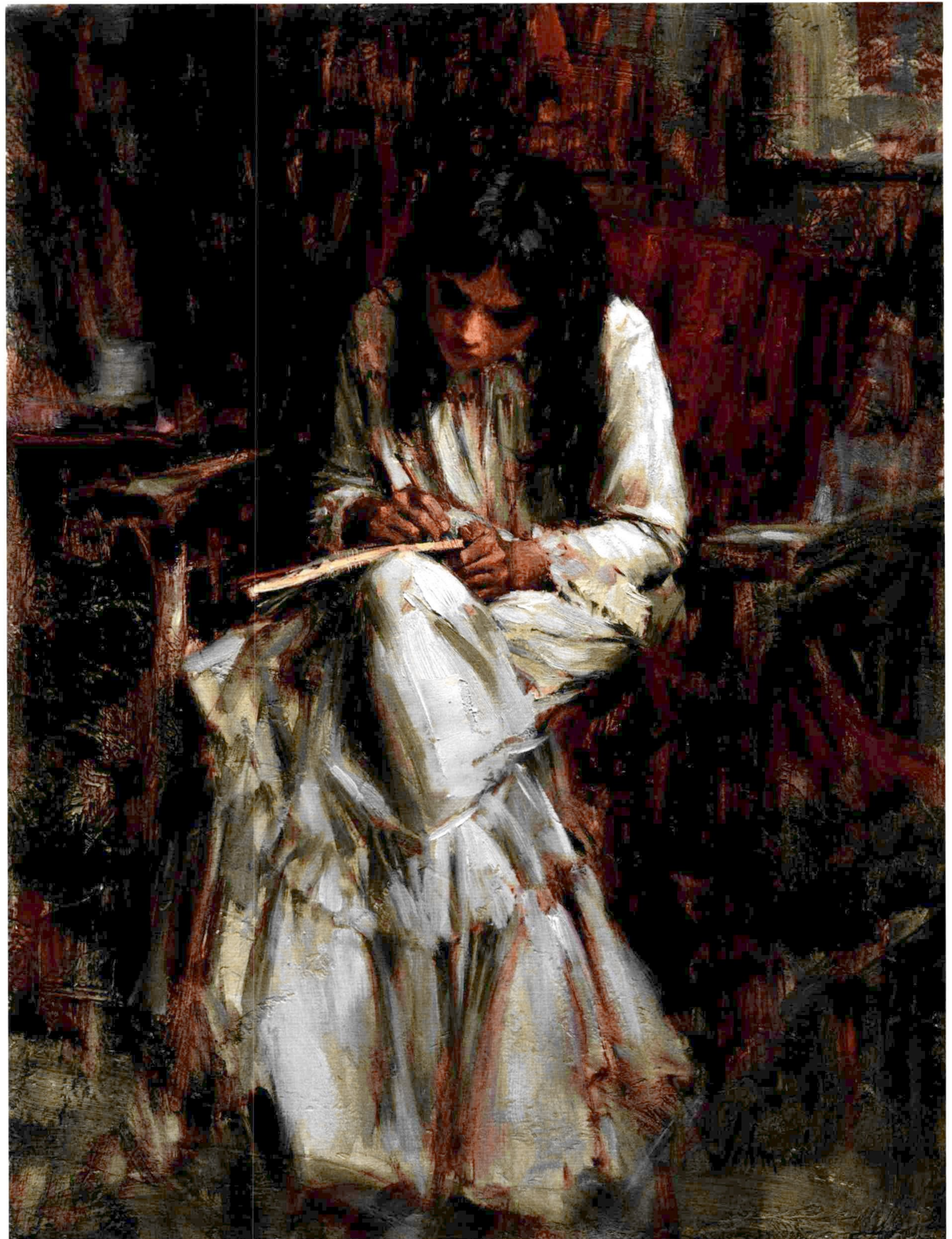
THE DRAWING

oil on panel, 12 x 16, 1980

In this little study my intent was to capture the intense concentration of the girl on her drawing. Before preparing my palette, I gave her a pencil and drawing tablet and asked her to draw while I laid out my colors. I often do something like this to put my model at ease. In this case the model knew she was not yet posing, and so assumed a perfectly natural and comfortable position, which was exactly what I wanted.

Today, of course, to put a young person like this at ease, I would tell her it was OK to text on her cell phone. The point is that to get a completely natural look to a pose, the subject (for me) must appear to be relaxed and unobserved, so I allow a certain amount of time at the beginning of a session for my model to sit any way she pleases, as if I were not even there.

All of this is part of the skill of painting. An artist and subject are a team, so to speak, even if a subject is a landscape or still life. I had done other studies of this young lady before, which made things go smoothly this time, and it helped that she enjoyed being part of the process of creating a painting. It was easy then to work successfully to get her to be herself and forget about me while I painted. It made all the difference between a ho-hum pose, and a glimpse into a moment in her life.



WHAT THE BEGINNING SHOULD ACCOMPLISH

You will know you have a good start when you have enough correct painting on your canvas so you can clearly see where your work is headed, and the direction is the one you intended. If you should change your mind in the starting stage and decide to go in another direction, that is your prerogative. The starting phase is the time to clarify your direction or try different directions. It just makes good sense to remain fluid enough to accommodate a better idea if one comes along. Always feel free to experiment too. Try various ideas until a certain little light flashes in your mind telling you to go ahead now dear artist, you're on the right track.

THE ALL IMPORTANT BLOCK-IN

The initial stage of a painting is when, as they say, you get most of your ducks in a row. It is called a **block-in**. The amount of painting necessary to secure a useful beginning will vary. One painter may need a very extensive, time-consuming block-in to feel confident, while another might need only a few accurately placed lines and dots. I'm told John Singer Sargent sometimes spent days pushing paint around before he launched into the middle and end phase of his painting. He also did color studies beforehand.

The nature of the subject and how you intend to paint it will call for block-ins which might be quite simple in some situations and more complex in others. A subject containing only a few well-defined shapes is easier to block-in than one filled with a jumble of contrasting values and colors. A simple portrait study, a head centered within a canvas, for example, might require almost no block-in at all, merely a few colors for the flesh tones and darks. Large compositional paintings with many elements often call for extensive block-ins before a clear picture of their design effectiveness can be seen. Likewise, very elaborate and intricate subjects need more careful attention at the start. It is a good idea to get the hang of several block-in methods so you have a repertoire of appropriate responses. Small color sketches are very helpful too.

One of my personal guidelines is to ask myself how little I need to put on the canvas before I can get into the finishing fun. **Finishing** for me is any stroke I apply that does not need changing or alteration by overpainting. Finished strokes are those that will appear on the surface of the painting when it is completed. My block-in will be only what is necessary to deal with the size of my picture, the complexity of the subject, the type of rendering I wish to use, and the available time I have.

SOME STARTING APPROACHES (Block-ins)

The many ways of rationally starting a painting can be divided into two rather broad categories:

1. Systems that introduce accurate pictorial elements more or less gradually.
2. Systems that establish accurate pictorial elements quickly or even immediately.

The first group of starting methods (gradual) is the most commonplace. Nearly all represent various ways to manage the complexities of color and form **without taking everything on all at once**. They involve sneaking up on the subject in one way or another. Most of these gradational systems withhold certain important items until the very end—things like the most powerful colors on the subject, the pure white or black values, and even the exact drawing. Those strong punches are held in reserve for the final stages of the work. The idea is to avoid making specific commitments until a comfortable approximation of the subject is on the canvas—to be able to visualize the painting as a whole before the application of the true colors, values, edges, and drawing.

The second group of starting systems is more sophisticated. They bypass the sketchy stage and go directly into the actual colors and shapes seen on the subject. There are as few preliminaries as possible, and accurate painting starts with the first strokes. However, they require a more distinct mental image of the finished work (to serve as a guide), and a much tighter discipline, especially in drawing. Although I have worked with all of the familiar starting methods in the years I have been painting, I have come to use these rather impromptu beginnings more and more, not because they are better, but because they are more enjoyable.



EARRING - (Beginning stage)



EARRING oil on canvas, 16 x 12, 1972

This small quick study was started as a line and mass block-in because the pose was not an easy one for the model to maintain, and I had to indicate her hand positions immediately. The colors and values were uncomplicated, so it was mostly a problem in drawing. It was necessary to establish the placement of the hands in relation to the head at the very beginning because they act together as a single unit. The line approach with a thin wash for the masses seemed best. Once the important major shapes were placed, I could render them individually while still having the whole picture before me.

SIX BEGINNINGS

Here are six of the ways I use most frequently when I start my paintings. All are oil painting procedures because oil is my principle medium, but the general principles involved can, for the most part, be applied to other mediums. The exception is watercolor, because its requirements usually (but not always) demand a unique sequence of applying washes in a gradual build up from lightest tones to darkest. (Nevertheless, the principles underlying good drawing, color, values, and edges remains.) In practice I rarely use these ways entirely as discrete systems with rigid procedural sequences; rather, I use them in combination with one another according to my need.

1. LINE AND MASS BLOCK-IN

This familiar method of starting originated so far back its origins are lost in time. When our prehistoric pals drew on the walls of their caves they created colored line drawings. The Minoans used it on their pornographic pottery (as did the Incas). The Chinese used it on their screens. Our Renaissance and Pre-Renaissance brethren used it for everything. The great strength and popularity of it throughout the history of art is that the artist has absolute control at every step of the way (well, almost).

This type of block-in is little more than a line drawing with colors and values placed inside the lines, like a child's coloring book or paint-by-numbers rendering. (Except there are no numbers, and you do the lines too.)

In oil painting, the drawing is best rendered on a canvas already lightly toned with a wash of a gray color to subdue the white ground of the primed canvas. (Black and Terra Rosa, or a black and dark brown mixture for example.) The lines are customarily done with oil paint (using a small pointed brush) or soft willow charcoal sticks (the two favorites), but pencil, pastel, and almost any other inert substance will do just as well as long as it can be easily erased and corrected.

The mass tones are laid on within the lines very thinly, as a "scumble" (paint scrubbed on sparingly in its tube consistency), or as a wash of oils thinned with turpentine or one of its substitutes, such as mineral spirits or other medium. When the colored drawing is finished, it is painted over completely with opaque pigment, which of course obliterates all the lines. Some painters at first are very insecure without their lines. I have often watched them painstakingly apply the opaque paint up to, but not quite on, the lines in an attempt to save them—not a good idea. When the lines are gone, that's it, they have done their job.

So why go to all of that work making a careful drawing and then cover it up? Because it serves a very real need: the need for control, especially when we are in the learning stage, when our confidence is still developing. Most painters are more at ease starting with outlines rather than masses. We learn to draw this way as children. The various art forms we are involved with when we are young—cartoons, comic books, coloring books, etc., are mostly colored line drawings. Perhaps our later adult sense of security working within lines stems from this early grounding. It is, however, a learned experience. Babies and very young children make their own scribbles spontaneously, then progress to proto drawings. Because of the undeveloped motor control in their hands, they are initially unable to stay within lines when coloring in their first coloring books. They must be pressured to do it by adults, thus for better or worse, a lifelong habit is established.

In our art school training, probably all of us were taught to use a line drawing as a guide, particularly in a life drawing class. I have watched many painters work from life, and I have rarely come across one who did not need some way to visualize his or her artistic idea as a line drawing before starting. Even though there is no evidence we are hard-wired in our DNA to make line drawings, it still seems almost instinctive to use lines, even though the first ones placed may be rather slapdash. Except when line drawings are used as a singular art on its own, line drawings are essentially just diagrams of reality and not an illusion of how our individual realities appear to us (as painting does). They indicate boundaries similar to the way maps and blueprints do. Most importantly, they are easy and quickly understood.



CHEYENNE COWBOY oil on canvas, 16 x 20, 1994

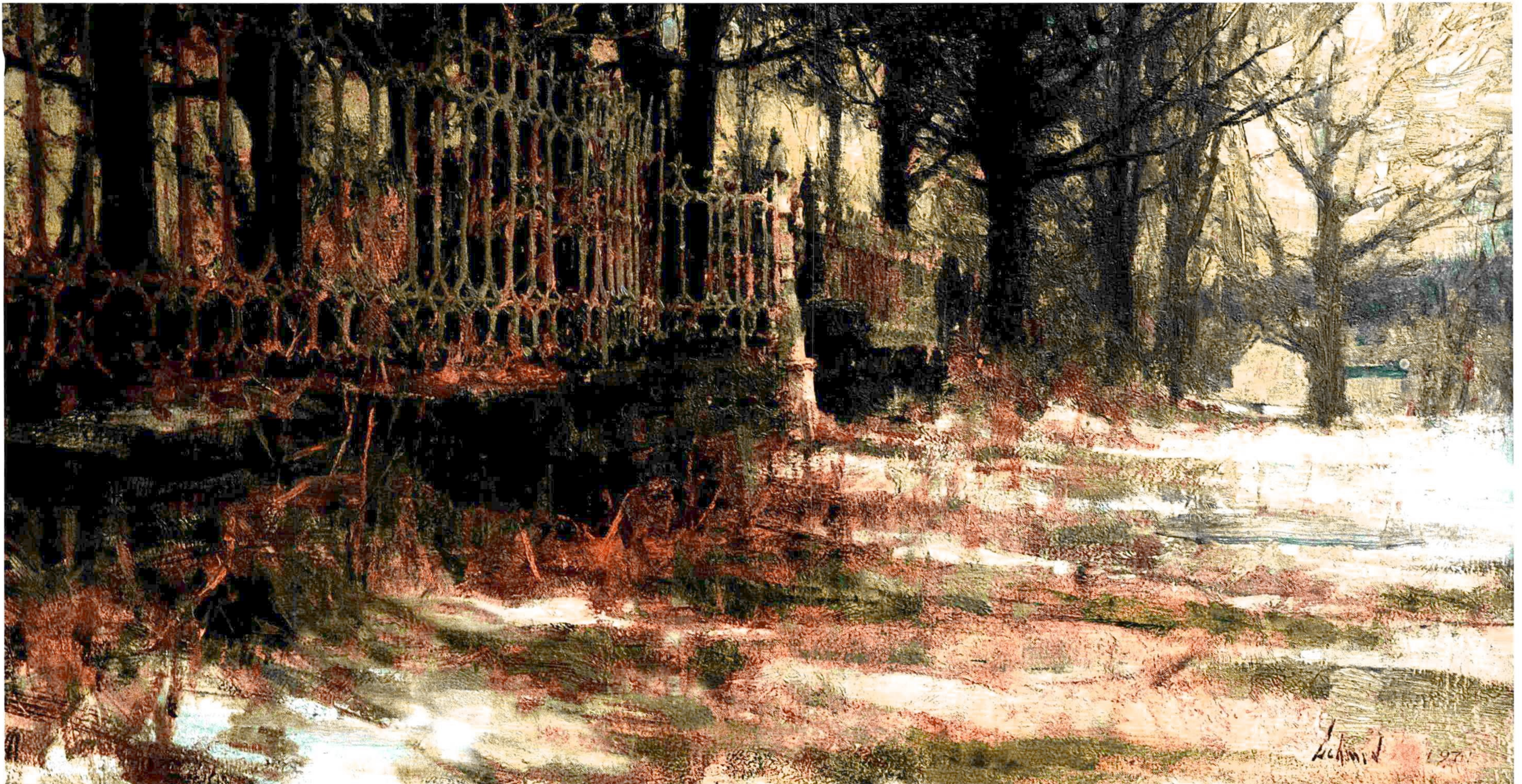


IRON FENCE (Transparent block-in stage) oil on canvas, 16 x 30, Connecticut, 1971

IRON FENCE appeared as painting sequences in my earlier landscape book (Richard Schmid Paints Landscapes, Watson-Guption Publications, 1975). This is the only intermediate stage image surviving from that series. On the page opposite, a recently discovered photograph of the final painting is seen. It shows how transparent turpentine washes can be used as an underpainting when a subject has complex drawing features. The idea was to disregard serious color at this point in order to concentrate on drawing accuracy.

One big advantage I had in this case was that most of the transparent darks I used here in the trees and elsewhere were actually many of the same colors in the subject. If you compare the intermediate and final stages, you can see nearly all of the darks seen above were retained unchanged throughout the finishing process. Also, in the stage above there was no excessive paint in the light areas to interfere with subsequent overpainting.

During the laying in of the monochrome work above, I gave attention to the values, drawing, **and** the edges. It was only necessary to take extra care to maintain the soft edges during the finishing process. The painting was completed in one day, so I was able to work wet-into-wet, which made it relatively easy to do.



IRON FENCE oil on canvas, 16 x 30, Connecticut, 1971

The trick in finishing this was to avoid a fastidious (excessively drawn) look to the rendering of the fence, because the fence, while it is interesting in itself, is not the real point of this painting. My goal was to capture the darkly beautiful mood of this 19th century rusted ironwork shaded by the ancient sugar maple trees. Such icons of the past are irreplaceable parts of the New England landscape. This one, however, was bulldozed into oblivion along with the majestic trees and stonework, to make room for a modern house. Such is progress.

Note that I was able to retain the quietude of the fence through an interplay of values and edges, and by incorporating into the ironwork many of the colors of the land, sky, and trees. It was not particularly clever of me to think of doing that. All of those colors, values, and edges were already there as part of the natural aging process. When Mother Nature is not interfered with, she always grows more beautiful with age.

I was fortunate in painting this to have plenty of working time. I was set up and working by 9:30 a.m., and the block-in, though detailed, went fairly quickly. An early April dusting of snow was still on the ground, but at that time of the year, temperatures tend to be warmer and the days longer. On this day I was lucky to have a steady, bright, overcast light to work by.

John Singer Sargent often required very little to get started on a portrait. He usually placed a few lines with a charcoal stick to indicate placement of the head and its features, then followed with a wash to establish the major value areas, and that was it. He was ready for the serious paint. Many of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's finished paintings and posters were actually very sophisticated colored line drawings, with the line work showing prominently as one of his styles. Mary Cassatt too, in many of her pastels and paintings, incorporated her initial starting lines into her finishing stages.

I'm sure we are all familiar with the observation that there are no lines in nature. It's true, there are none in the sense that there are no outlines around everything as in cartoons. (Any apparent lines are simply long thin shapes, such as telephone wires in a landscape.) But at the start of a painting, lines are very handy shortcuts and indicators of where the serious painting should go. They are useful for quickly indicating the boundaries of large masses, or to get the "feel" of where and how you wish to direct your viewer's attention. Just make sure they don't show when you finish (unless that is what you intend). As you might notice, particularly in my landscape and still life paintings, I like to slightly alter some of my compositional starting lines so they appear as identifiable objects or other elements in my subjects. I have more to say on this in Chapter Ten on Composition.

ADVANTAGES

Starting out in a sketchy way just feels safer. You can fool around trying one thing after another until things seem right, then go on to do as much correcting and manipulation of your composition and drawing as you need *before* you lay in the serious paint. Few things in painting are more painful than having to scrape off some masterly work done in the wrong spot! When you do begin with sketchy lines, keep in mind their function is to establish the *general* placement of your subject within the picture area, rather than the precise outlines of what you are going to paint.

Worry only about where you wish to put your major shapes, and how big or little they are. Don't go in for detail or profound revelations about the subject at this point. The goal of this sketching stage is to organize the overall composition and merely suggest important drawing elements, such as anatomy, or perspective, or proportions. Keep your paint thin, but not necessarily thinned with any medium, as you sketch. A buildup of heavy paint in the beginning can be troublesome later.

When all of this has been accomplished, the sketchy work has largely served its purpose. It is pointless to continue with it unless you intend a sketchy "look" to be the prevailing surface appearance (technique) for the remainder and finish of the painting. Some of the Impressionists and many others did just that, but they were pursuing "broken color" effects to the exclusion of other pictorial elements. There is no right or wrong choice at this point. Your only guide is the picture you have in your mind of what *you* want the ultimate picture on your canvas to look like.

However, if you *do* wish to take your painting beyond mere scintillating dabs of color, you must break away from sketching and get careful. You must shift your thinking and make the lines and placement of masses as accurately as you can. Why? Because their new job is to pinpoint exactly where the finishing paint must go, and to what degree of literal portrayal and detail you are aiming at.

Regardless of how you decide to proceed after your start, a line and mass block-in is ideal for organizing complex compositions, particularly larger paintings with numerous figures or objects. Therefore it is important to keep the drawing lines very fine, particularly in portrait or figure painting. If you use a brush which leaves heavy half-inch wide lines to draw an attractive lady's nose, the result could be disastrous, because it would be hard to tell if the inside or outside of the thick line is the boundary line.

It isn't necessary to be highly detailed with your drawing, just make sure the lines you make do not constitute discrete shapes in themselves. Your line should define a border between shapes without adding volume to the features. It isn't necessary to use tiny brushes for your lines unless you prefer to. If your large flat bristle brushes are good quality and well-shaped, they will produce fine lines as well as broad strokes. The palette knife, used on edge, is perfect for more subtle lines.

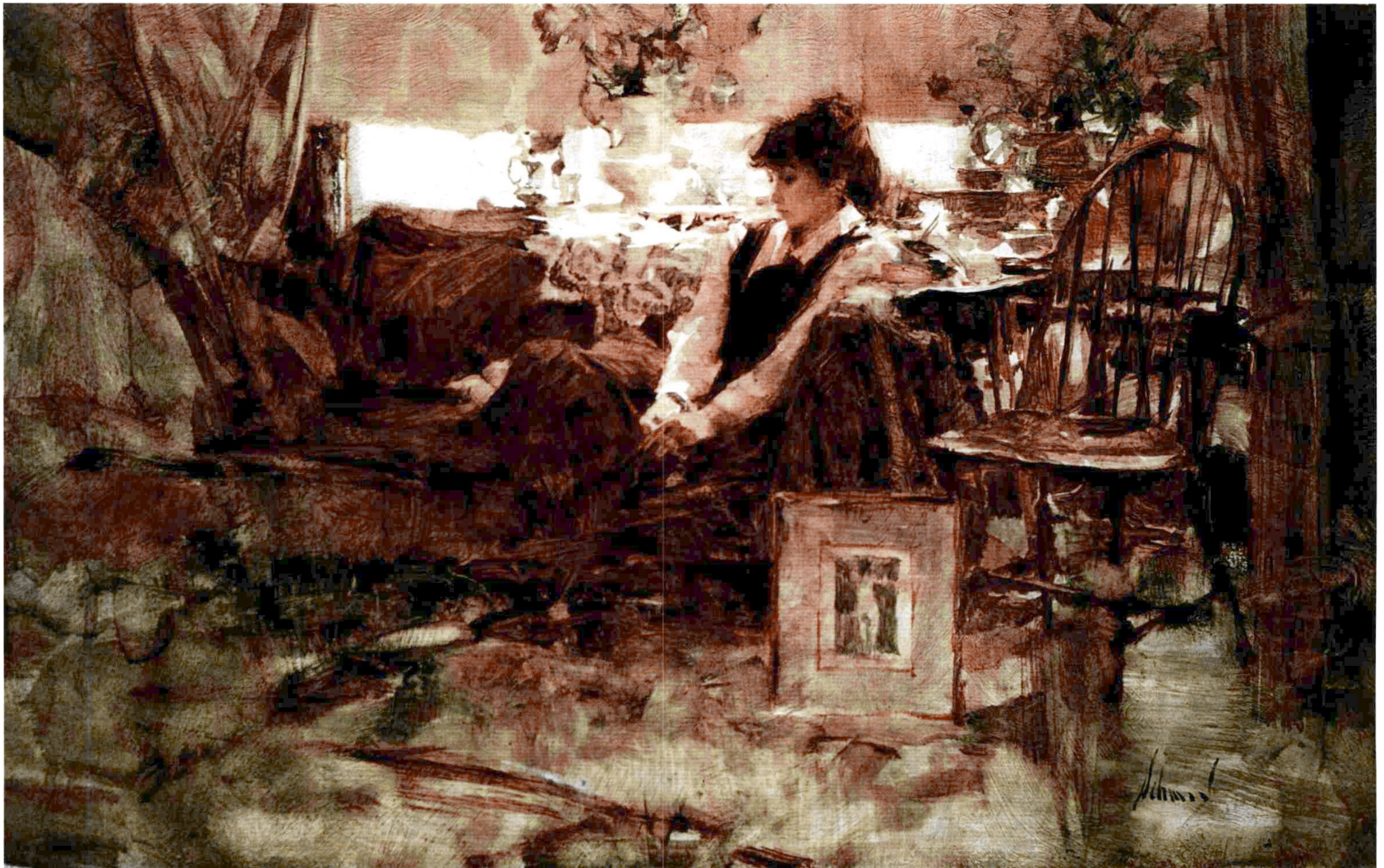
DRAWBACKS

There are two weaknesses in the line drawing approach. First, it is very time consuming. If time is important (as in landscape painting), you may want to keep things brief by going after only the largest masses in your painting. If your subject is too complex to be reduced to a few simple areas, then you must either find more time to complete the picture by arranging for several painting sessions, or find a different approach. (I come to that later.)

Second, the quality of edges may suffer when the finishing paint is applied because of a tendency to paint up to the lines, but not into them. The ensuing rendering will lack the desired looseness and fluidity it might otherwise have. Sargent seemed to get around all of that very nicely because he was not dependent on his lines. They represented only indications to him, and apparently he never felt lost when he painted over them in creating his edges.

Perhaps because of the need to have them in the first place, many less self-assured painters and even some experienced ones are reluctant to see the lines disappear, but it really should not be intimidating. After all if you want to redraw the lines, you should be able to. Besides, I don't know of any other way of letting go than just to do it.

How well I remember my teacher, Bill Mosby, deliberately wiping away my perfectly good paintings from time to time just to see if I could repaint them. He explained how doing a piece well *once* might be an accident—but not *twice* in succession.



SKETCH OF NANCY oil on canvas, 10 x 16, 1991 (This shows a transparent monochrome rendering. From this stage the work can be finished as a conventional oil painting, or left as it is).



GOLD CUPS - Stage one

This still life definitely called for a line and mass block-in, because there were seven objects: two gold cups, a bowl, a basket, a blue vase, a tarnished silver porridge dish, and a brass flower pot, most of which I felt required extra attention to make their ellipses accurate and matching in perspective.

To establish the warmth I wanted in this work, I applied a transparent turpentine wash of Transparent Oxide Red with a touch of Viridian and Cadmium Orange. Using pure spirits of turpentine instead of mineral spirits allowed the wash coating to dry quickly so I could settle into the drawing phase. Once I had successfully indicated the key points of drawing I felt at ease knowing where everything had to be placed.



GOLD CUPS - Stage two

At this point, having established the difficult perspective with my ellipses I could have started the finishing process in almost any area of my subject. Indeed from here on, it was a matter of applying the darker values as transparent washes and working into those areas with some of the more brilliant colors within the main area of focus.

In some of my paintings, especially the more complicated ones, I like to put in some finishing work right away in order to establish at the onset the degree of finish I would like to see. I always decide what that degree of finish is going to be at the start of any painting. Note that at this stage I have clearly established my lightest light, my darkest dark, and some of my brightest colors.

GOLD CUPS - Stage three

*Now I'm getting somewhere. Perhaps I should have quit at this point, or very near this point, but I chose to forge ahead. Maybe I was driven by vanity or ego because I wanted to paint myself in the reflections of the two gold cups and the brass pot in the background. The reflections, incidentally, were the most difficult areas to work with, because though they act like mirrors, they are not **flat** like mirrors, and thus present distorted images.*

At this stage I was keenly aware of the hard and soft edges in the various elements before me, and how necessary it was to use the richness of edges not only to define textures (and there were so many different ones), but also to establish a flow, if you will, throughout the composition.

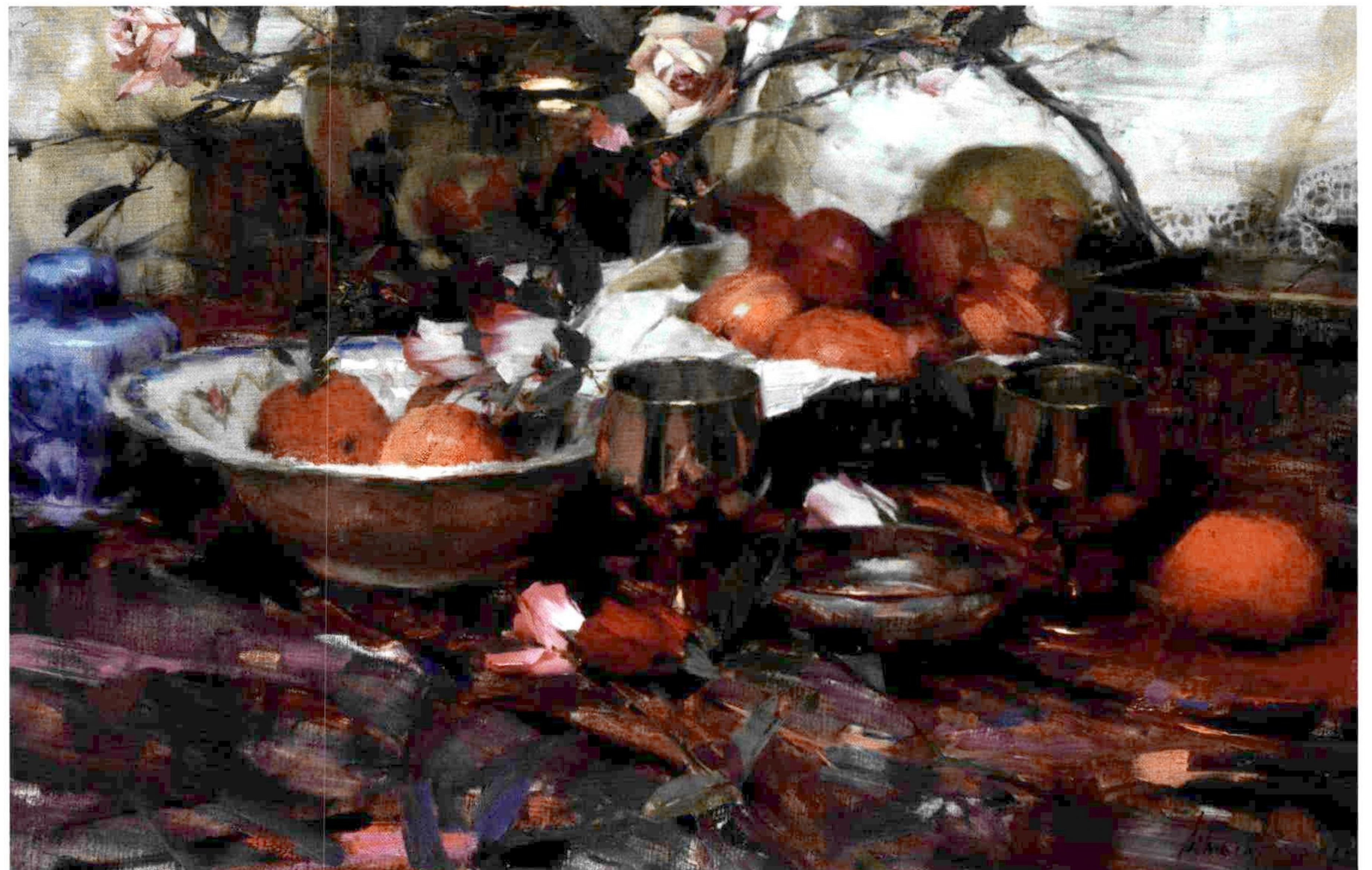


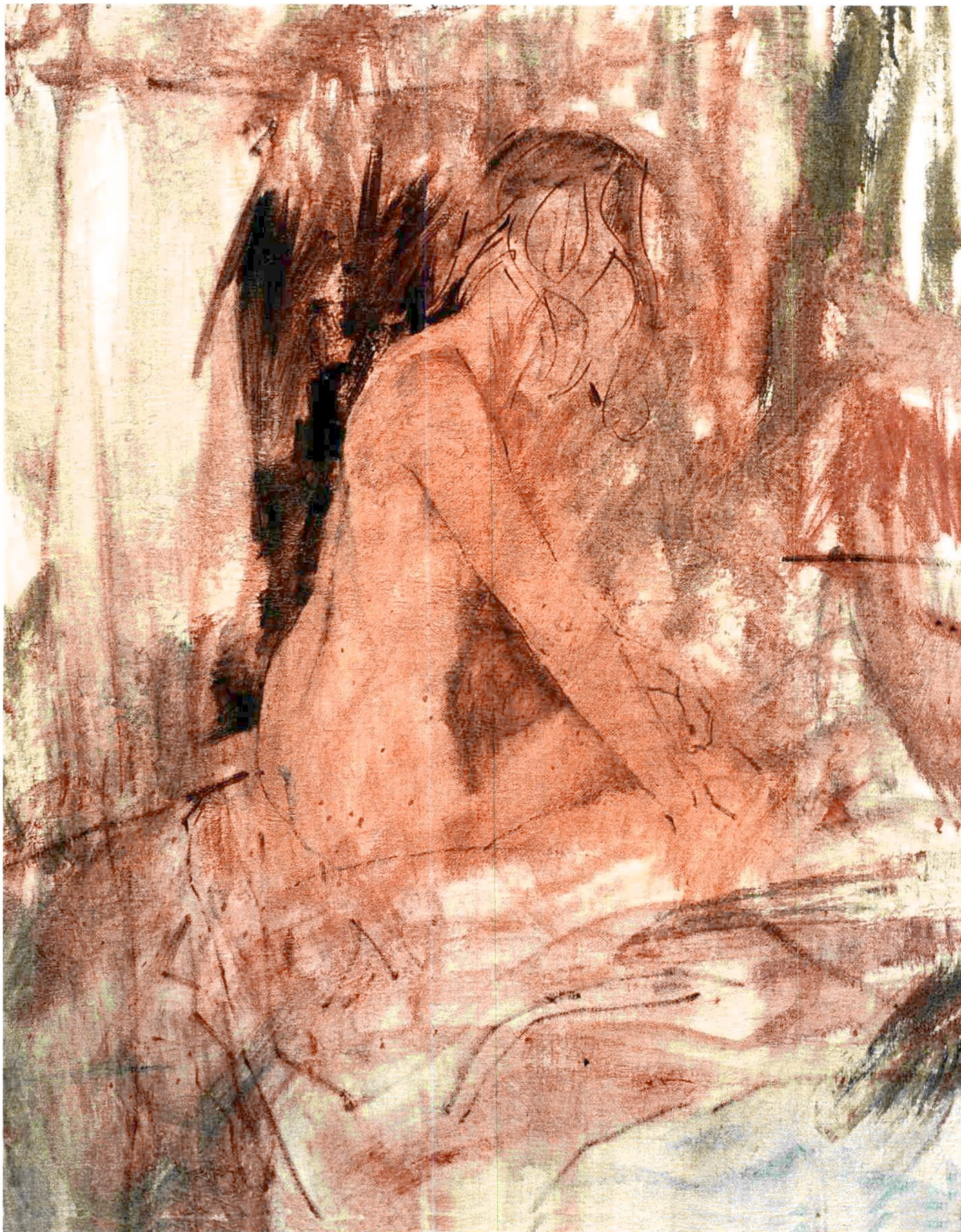
GOLD CUPS oil on canvas, 18 x 28, 1988

Now comes the challenge we must all face at one time or another—how not to ruin a painting that is pretty good so far. With this caveat in mind, I decided to keep my foreground interesting but not distracting. The compelling pattern of connected values and colors across the center of my painting had to completely dominate.

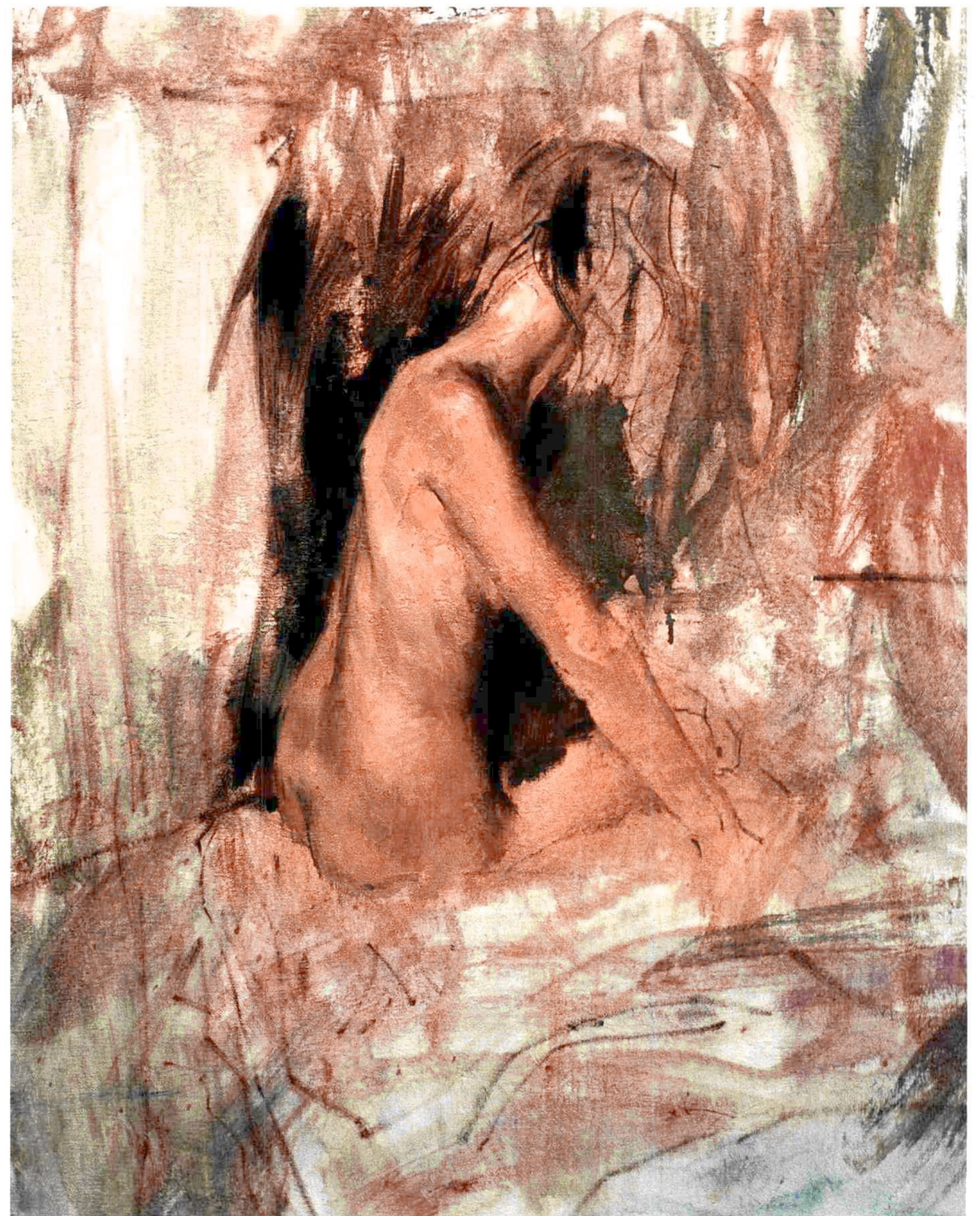
To keep the foreground colorful and rich, but not overwhelming or busy, I simply painted my colors within a narrow range of values, with only bright accents here and there to keep from boring my viewer. This is a busy painting, but it seems to me to have a quiet order to it, like my mother's kitchen. Her's was a very busy place, with everything where it should be, to do what needed to be done.

My mom's life was a work of art.



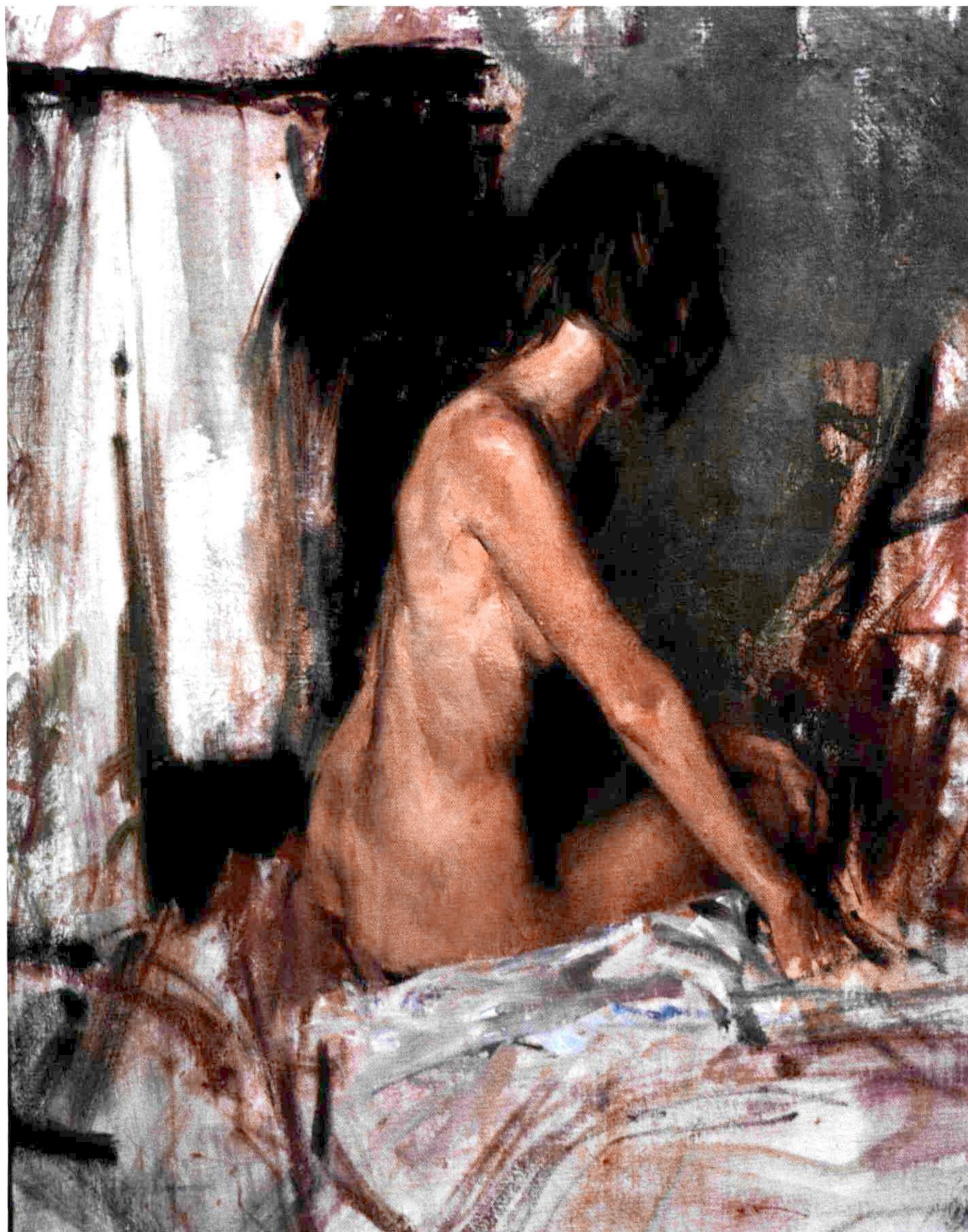


NUDE - Stage one

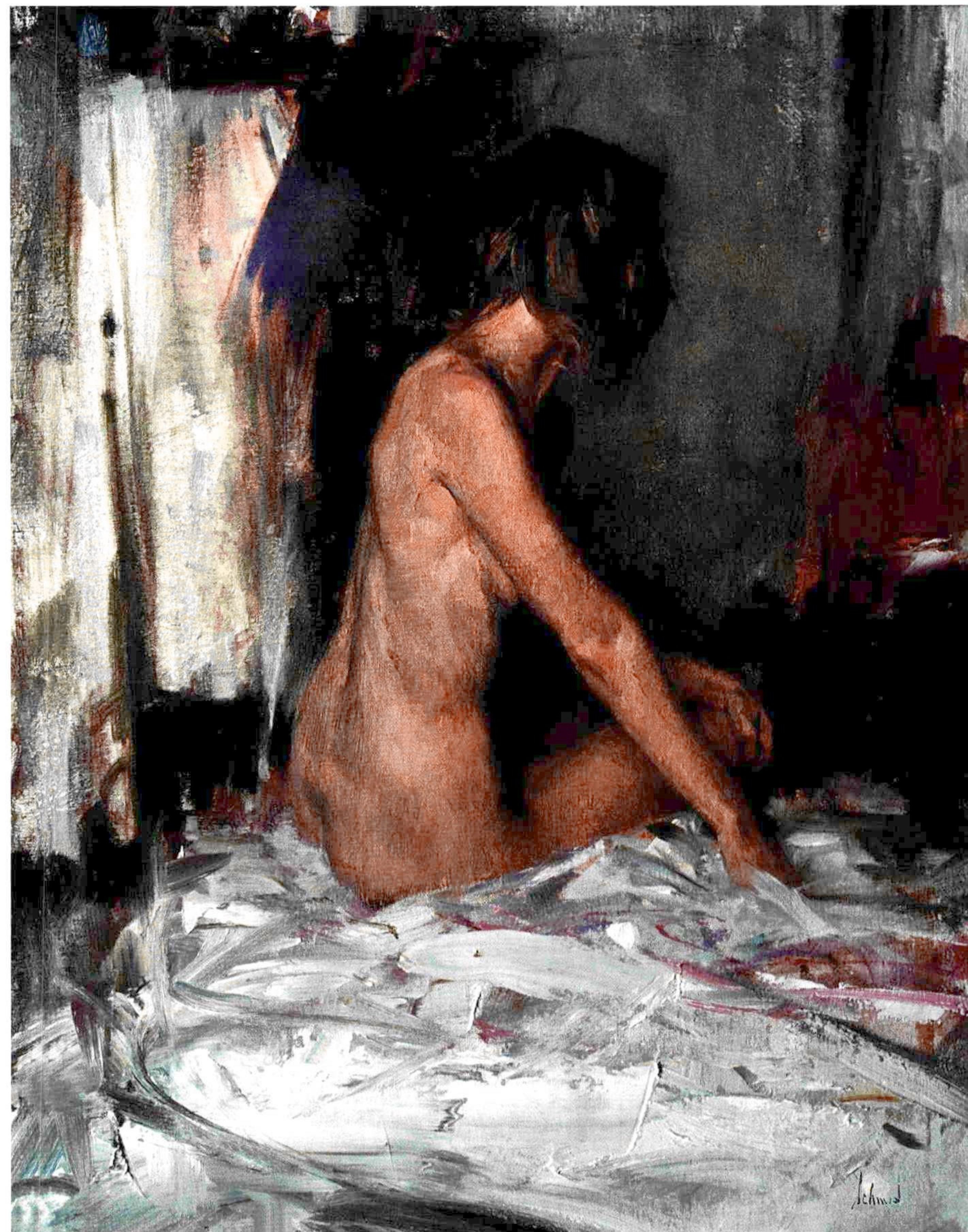


NUDE - Stage two

This work appeared only in its finished stage in my book on figure painting (Richard Schmid Paints the Figure - Watson-Guptill, 1973). My starting method was a typical line and mass block-in, similar to the way I started paintings in art school. In stage one, I had to use very few lines because the entire subject was simple in form. Back views are always easier because of the uncomplicated anatomy (compared to a front view), which is why, with comparatively little to work with, it was important to get things right. Note that the transparent wash on the figure was very close to the finished flesh tones, and I had only a few of the key darks indicated. In stage two, I was already into the finishing flesh tones using opaque mixtures of White, Terra Rosa, Yellow Ochre, and Cadmium Red. Note too how the addition of the dark values gave an immediate three-dimensional look to the figure. (The darks were mixtures of Ultramarine Blue plus Transparent Oxide Red.) It was clear at this stage where the painting was headed.



NUDE - Stage three



NUDE oil on canvas, 30 x 24, 1968

Stage three shows the figure nearly complete. The picture as a whole is almost, but not quite, at the point where (in retrospect) I wish I had stopped. The note of red which appears in the final stage is a definite plus, but it should have been placed at the very beginning, because it is such a strong clear color. The final stage also has some strong palette knife work in the foreground, and the strong whites in the same area enhance the richness of the model's skin color, so it is not a total loss. This painting was done 45 years ago (at this writing) in 1968, when I was beginning to use palette knife painting more frequently in my work. From the standpoint of how I would do things today, the palette knife is perhaps a little too conspicuous, since outside of the foreground, there is no use of the knife anywhere else in the picture. Today I would use it here and there on the figure and background where it would be appropriate, just to give a look of better balance to my paint application.

2. TRANSPARENT (OIL) MONOCHROME BLOCK-IN

This transparent monochrome block-in is a big step up from the previous method. It is a nearly complete value study done with *one* color family on a white lead oil-primed canvas, panel, or other ground. The block-in, when carried to a full value stage (which means the complete range of values from white to black), will resemble something like an old enlarged sepia photo. The idea here is that you can work out all the problems in value, drawing, edges, and composition without worrying about color—then do a completely finished painting on top of it with opaque paint using the mono underpainting as an exact guide.

I was introduced to this method of starting a picture as my initiation into serious painting under Bill Mosby in 1953. He had learned and practiced it at the Belgian Royal Academy before World War II. I believe it is an extension of the much earlier process of glazing techniques used routinely in Europe well before Direct painting appeared in the 1600s, and more or less made glazing obsolete.

The difference between the two methods is this: while both begin with a monochrome underpainting, the much earlier version for glazing created the underpainting with *opaque* pigments. The artist then overlaid the desired colors as a series of transparent colored glazes (oil paint thinned to transparency with a varnish-based medium). On the other hand, the more modern method achieves full color by painting over the transparent underpainting, as a mostly opaque rendering. In some cases, parts of the underpainting, most often the darks, are allowed to remain as they are as parts of the finished painting.

FAREWELL TO LINES

The very important difference between this approach and starting with lines is I am able to think in terms of shapes and masses instead of lines. In other words I was learning to think and see like a *painter* instead of a *draftsman*. The many underpainting renderings I did during my years with Mosby were identical in principle to the full value mass rendering in charcoal I was doing in life class. The difference was that I used brushes and paints instead of burnt willow sticks. Lights and darks were achieved by adding or removing pigment from the canvas surface. It was a process of brushing paint on thinly, then wiping it away to get the light values. I used everything I could think of to wipe for my values: stiff bristle brushes, my fingers, rags, paper towels, Q-tips, steel wool, sandpaper, even my Swiss Army knife for highlights. *No white paint* was used to create values in the block-in. The final result was a transparent full color painting on top of a monochrome painting.

Another big advantage of working with monochrome paint in this way is the block-in looks like the subject right away, because of the careful attention to edges and values. The fun of it is paint can be pushed around endlessly without a buildup of paint, and without creating a mess of dismal color because I use only *one* family of color. As you may have noticed, in this text I often refer to colors as belonging to "families" rather than "hues." I find *family* more descriptive, and I like the sound of it better than the word hue.

SURFACE REQUIREMENTS

The working surface must be non-absorbent and smooth, with just barely enough "tooth" to hold the paint, but not as slick as the oilcloth on my mother's kitchen table. The canvas must yield to being wiped completely back to pure white whenever necessary. A high quality smooth portrait linen canvas or a Masonite[®] panel with a minimum of texture is best. Whatever the support, it *must* be primed with white lead (never acrylic). I now use a baby-bottom smooth, triple-primed canvas. Other grounds such as acrylic gesso primer will not work. They stain immediately and cannot be brought back to pure white (as white lead can). To test any surface for its manipulative capability, apply some strong color such as Terra Rosa, allow it to sit for a minute, then wipe it off with a rag. If the Terra Rosa comes away completely, leaving the original white ground, the canvas is the right stuff.

As you will see in the following six stages of this demonstration, my block-in technique differs from the dictionary definition as "a sketch or outline done roughly and generally without detail." I would define the type of block-in I use as "a sketch or outline **accurately** done, with only **necessary** detail."

I am concerned with accuracy and detail in these stages because I believe a sketch can be superbly loose and free and yet be entirely accurate at the same time. To me, there is no valid reason why brushstrokes cannot be spontaneous and lively and still be the right length, shape, and color at every stage of painting. This is particularly important in the beginning.

The notion that it is better to start a painting **right** than to start it **almost right** seems simple and obvious. Perhaps because this idea is so self-evident, it is easily taken for granted, forgotten, or merely overlooked.

For example, I can remember my own student days, when I was first confronted with the complexities of doing a life-size figure painting. I made every possible mistake before I learned, with painful slowness, that a painting cannot be done all at once. It must be done one stroke at a time, and the best strokes to start with are those that describe the most obvious values, shapes, or colors in the subject.

Somewhere in every subject there is a darkest dark, a pure white, a shadow, or an area of color with a geometric shape. I go after these elements first because they are obvious and therefore easy to paint accurately. And I've found the greater the number of accurate elements I establish in the beginning, the easier it is for me to judge the more difficult and subtle areas against them later.

I begin this work as a full-value block-in using transparent mixtures of Transparent Oxide Brown, Cobalt Blue, and Transparent Oxide Red (my early art school palette). No white is used until I begin adding my final opaque colors in Stage 4 on the model's arm and knee.



FIGURE STUDY - Stage 1



FIGURE STUDY - Stage 2



FIGURE STUDY - Stage 3



FIGURE STUDY - Stage 4

Stage 3. This is the final stage of the transparent block-in. All of the important and minor anatomical details are complete. This method of blocking-in has several minor disadvantages. It is too cumbersome for small work, and I avoid using it for any painting smaller than about one-fourth life size (here, my canvas is 20" x 30"). It is also a very tedious procedure and can result in a rather tight painting.

On the other hand, a block-in using a full-value monochrome wash does have important advantages, particularly when the subject is very complex, or the pose is difficult to capture. The first advantage is that because the wash is monochromatic, I am free to work out all the problems of drawing and composition during the block-in, without also being concerned with color at this stage. The second advantage is this method eliminates a classic oil painting problem—the hopeless mess which results from extensive correcting into thick, fresh paint.

Because only a very thin wash is used, this method allows for endless corrections with virtually no build-up of paint. And after I solve all the problems of drawing, values, and edges in the block-in stage, I can relax, concentrate entirely on color and texture, and enjoy the finishing process!

Stage 4. The canvas, which is stained rather than painted, is now ready to receive opaque paint. I begin with the raised knee and the shoulder because those areas contain the lightest lights. Together with the dark mass of the hair, they constitute the focal point of the picture. For the flesh tones in the light, I use mixtures of Yellow Ochre Light, Terra Rosa, and White, with Viridian or Cobalt Blue added for the highlights. The darkest darks are mixtures of Transparent Oxide Brown, Permanent Alizarin Crimson and Ultramarine Blue. By establishing these main elements first, I immediately set the color key and style of paint application for the entire painting. Here, as in the block-in, I try to place the paint accurately to avoid subsequent reworking and correcting as much as possible.

Stage 5. *As I further develop the figure, I apply my paint in a variety of ways, using heavy flat brushstrokes in the forearm, triceps, and scapular area of the back. I use a palette knife primarily on the center of the closer thigh and knee and on the thorax. As I enter the darker areas I switch to slightly thinner, and more transparent paint in the darks below the arm, between the model's left foot, thigh and behind her pelvis.*

*During all of the finishing work, it is essential to retain the transparent quality of the darks. (When I use the word **transparent** here, I do not mean paint that has been thinned with a medium. I am referring to paint used in the same consistency as it comes from the tube, but applied sparingly.)*

It is the interplay of the strong, opaque lights and the rich, transparent darks that gives the figure its three-dimensional character.

In this final stage of my demonstration, I concentrate carefully on edges. There is nothing arbitrary about them. They are hard where the form turns sharply, as it does at the tip of the raised knee. They are softer where the form turns slowly, as it does below the model's left leg, and where the darks merge with the background on the edge of the hair.

I use heavy impasto brushwork on her closer foot and shoulder; drybrush in the foreground areas, particularly near the same foot, and scumbling above the head and shoulder. I apply paint heavily on the red drapery above and behind the figure's back and scrape it with a palette knife.

If you compare this final stage to the previous stage, you will see how little I have disturbed the original wash. Of all the ways to start this offers the greatest degree of control and flexibility. It is also the safest way to deal with much larger and complex subjects.



FIGURE STUDY - Stage 5



FIGURE STUDY oil on canvas, 20 x 30, 1972



JAMIE conté, 22 x 17, 1975

JAMIE began as a conté drawing on a full sheet of 100% rag drawing paper (3-ply, hot-pressed). It is a very hard surface paper, which I use because the surface of conventional drawing paper absorbs too much pigment and allows for only minimal erasure.

This technique is essentially a mass or tone drawing like the drawings I did back in anatomy class at the American Academy of Art. The difference is that here I am using conté crayons instead of charcoal. In my opinion, conté is far more appealing and natural looking when drawing people or animals (it does not lend itself as much in landscape or still life drawings).

I use a combination of conté crayons and pencils. All are earth colors ranging from an orange-red terra rosa shade, to a dark reddish brown. These are all I need to apply my lines and values. To remove areas of pigment, I use mostly a kneaded eraser, a harder eraser, soft steel wool, and an assortment of bristle brushes.

The key in conté drawing is a very light touch. The harder I press my crayon or pencil to the paper, the deeper particles of pigment are driven into the weave of the paper, which makes it nearly impossible to erase if necessary. Very deep tones can be created at later stages of a drawing when all of my lines are correct and any further erasing is unnecessary.

At the very end, I created the very smooth tones of the folds on Jamie's blouse using a soft brush dipped into acetone. Be careful with acetone. Use it sensibly with good ventilation, and don't smoke. Acetone has a flash point about the same as gasoline.

STAY SLIGHTLY WARM (Not hot)

I use warm red or brown earth colors, such as Terra Rosa and Venetian Red, for my block-in—never cool colors or Cadmium Yellows, Blues, Greens, and Blue-Violet colors in an underpainting. They cause a "muddy" look when they show through the final paint. A yellow underpainting causes a disruptive effect in judging subsequent colors, particularly with portraits or figurative work. It also tends to mix into subsequent paint, or it shows through between brushstrokes, producing a disagreeable jaundiced look. Warm red, red-brown, and orange-brown earth colors, on the other hand, act to enhance the final darks in a painting because they more closely replicate the actual temperature relationships. I rarely go as dark as black with this type of block-in, but when it is necessary, I use Transparent Oxide Brown with a touch of Ultramarine Blue mixed in. Otherwise my most frequent choice for the monochrome color is usually Terra Rosa alone, or with a bit of Yellow Ochre. I suggest you experiment to find a combination that pleases *you*.

I prefer to use these pigments because I tend to leave some portion of the block-in visible as part of my finished painting, and they are absolutely permanent even in the thinnest of washes. If you have doubts about a block-in color, simply mix a shade which doesn't strongly resemble any identifiable color family. Such a color will at least not interfere with anything. Stay away from Vandyke Brown or Burnt Umber for an underpainting (or for anything else). Both have a nasty habit of cracking. Simple mixtures of more stable colors will easily match them.

The rendering itself is a straightforward process of brushing on the dark values and wiping away paint to get the light values. The lights can be wiped away with almost anything—a clean brush, rags, paper towels or tissues, fingers, Q-tips, various soft grades of steel wool and sandpaper—whatever does the job. Clean turpentine, mineral spirits, and acetone (occasionally) will make the wiping more effective. Watch out though, they must be used very sparingly and carefully. They are extremely difficult to manipulate, and it is easy to inadvertently ruin things. These days I use only turpentine or mineral spirits when I apply my initial washes, and when there are no other means to expose the pure white of the canvas (as when I need a highlight). After I have used a solvent, I wait several minutes for it to evaporate entirely, or blot (not wipe) the area carefully with an absorbent towel before resuming work. Play it safe and use dry methods to add or remove paint *before* resorting to solvents.

The same caution applies to putting on the paint—keep away from wetness. I find that "soupy" paint—pigment thinned with medium or solvent—is difficult to control. If it does happen to land in the right place, it is tricky to make the edges behave when neighboring paint is applied. Therefore, to maintain control in the critical drawing areas, I use my pigment *in the same consistency as it comes from the tube* rather than thinning it. If I want a fluid look, I can lightly brush over the desired area once (and once only) with a soft sable or badger brush. If *that* fails, a satisfactory look of a transparent wash can be duplicated by lightly scumbling the paint on.

There is one catch to all of this. It is possible to carry this method to the point where the block-in resembles a large vintage photograph. This in itself is not necessarily a problem, but if it is too detailed and "tight," there might be a reluctance to paint over it in a free and loose manner—in a "painterly" way. (I use the word painterly to mean Bravura, a style of paint application characterized by flowing impasto brushstrokes—where the qualities of paint itself are essential to the impact of a picture—the opposite of "tight.") The inclination may be to overpaint timidly—falling into the mistake of trying to preserve the lines underneath. When this pressure develops I try to remember who is calling the shots. I am! I never allow myself to imagine that a painting or my subject is forcing me to do what I do. A painting is an inanimate object. I'm the boss. I have a brain. So do you.

Such pitfalls need not become problems if I keep in mind at the start of the block-in that its purpose is to guide me, and I can render it accurately without getting so complicated and intricate it becomes constricting. Even if it does, I can always reverse the process, which is why I like oil paint. One of its many advantages is that mistakes need not be permanent. It has a built-in safety factor. ***Nothing is ever unfixable!*** The worst possible blunder can be undone. A careful swipe with my palette knife will erase my most outrageous sins. It's better than going to confession because I can forgive myself (and no penance).

I can go back and change my squeaky little lines into whatever I wish. I can also paint over them without misgivings—which makes the best sense since that is my intention in the first place. The sole purpose of any preliminary work I do, (work which will likely be covered by ensuing paint), is to help me in the course of finishing by providing information about ***where*** things will go, ***how light or dark*** those things will be, and ***what their shapes and colors are***. Once I know those things, the rest is merrymaking.

This use of a fully-developed monochrome underpainting has countless variations reaching back in time, though not nearly as far as the Line and Mass method. The monochrome block-in grew out of the standard glazing techniques predating the introduction of oil paint some 600 years ago. The glazing process, like our monochrome wash, also employs a painting-under-a-painting system, but it reverses the sequence. Instead of opaque paint over transparent, glazing is transparent over opaque. ***The similarity, however, ends right there.***

In case you are ever tempted to try glazing, it is worth noting that for pure interminable tediousness, nothing beats it. The procedure begins with a careful line drawing. Over that, a complete monochrome painting is done with opaque paint, usually employing a cool black as the base color, plus white. (The result is a deathly photographic effect.) When the painting is thoroughly dry, color is introduced by the application of successive layers of transparent paint films (glazes) until the desired colors are reached. If the drying times between glazes are lumped together, the process could add up to many months or even years for the completion of one painting. Meanwhile, the subject, not to mention the inspiration, could dry up and blow away. Somehow, though, the Masters of this technique gave us some of our most brilliant treasures.

3. TRANSPARENT MONOCHROME AS A FINISHED PAINTING

Often when I do a monochrome block-in, as I have just described, the effect is so pleasing it seems a shame to make the delicate rendering disappear under heavy layers of opaque paint, even though it might have been my original intention. If a transparent monochrome is done with authority, it can more than stand on its own, even when originally intended as a block-in. Therefore, since I am the artist, I can do anything I decide is best—including ***changing my mind***. So! I sometimes waive my original idea and develop my painting as a purely transparent rendering.

During the time I was first experimenting with this technique I had also been working with conté crayon. My drawings were done on paper or real gesso panels, (not acrylic), as tonal studies rather than strictly linear renderings. I used solvents such as water, acetone, and denatured alcohol to push the crayon dust around as if it were paint. (Water though was never used when working with paper.) Conté crayon, however, had certain inherent drawbacks, mainly with its limited degree of erasure, which oil painting did not have. Naturally, it wasn't long before I was trying to imitate the effects of conté with transparent oil paint on white lead ground. The paint won out, and transparent monochrome as a form of finished art is now a familiar part of my repertoire.

The procedure itself and surface requirements are identical with the transparent monochrome block-in discussed above. The difference, of course, is that I do ***not*** paint over the transparent work with opaque paint. I retain the transparent block-in and carry it as far as I wish as a complete statement in itself, rather than merely a stage in a painting. I can develop it in great detail, or keep it sketchy. I can also choose to break away from the purely monochrome state and include whatever earth colors and other related pigments I wish (keeping it all transparent of course). Occasionally I give it an added interest of texture by a light rubbing with fine sandpaper or steel wool. My best advice is to experiment as much as you possibly can to get the look you want.



MOLLY oil on panel, 8 x 12, 1991

*In this sketch of my daughter Molly, I used several related colors: Terra Rosa, Yellow Ochre, Gambler Permanent Alizarin, Transparent Oxide Red, and Transparent Oxide Brown. This may seem like too many different colors to be called a monochrome (literally **one color**), but it is nevertheless because all of the pigments belong to the Red-Brown family. The beauty of using these earth tones is that I can paint them as increasingly warmer shades as I work gradually darker with the modeling and shadows. This duplicates the warm-cool properties of my north light windows and imparts a richness impossible to match when using any other set of colors as the dominant tone of a monochrome.*

There are endless possibilities for obtaining new effects with this transparent rendering. Remember, the key to achieving them is a perfect working surface, such as **white lead** on smooth canvas or panel, but not so smooth I could ice skate on it. It should also be nonabsorbent to the degree it can easily be wiped to create the light values. Over the years as I experimented with this lovely yet powerful technique, I worked with a variety of other surfaces and found they only offer qualities similar to, but not nearly as ideal as white lead if they are first given a coating to make them nonabsorbent. In effect I must size the surfaces of other materials with shellac or Damar varnish, sprayed or brushed on, and allowed to thoroughly dry. The study of *Jamie* on page 82 is a good example of an oil on paper. The paper was a cold-pressed 100% cotton rag (for permanence), treated with Damar varnish.

If I should botch the job, there is always the reassuring option of rescue by painting over everything with opaque paint and producing a regular oil painting (usually not my first choice). I always try first removing the transparent pigment altogether from the problem area, and give it another try. This is easily done if the paint is still wet by rubbing the troublesome area with a paper towel (using the more expensive but very absorbent ones such as Viva[®]), **very slightly** moistened with mineral spirits. If the paint layer has dried, lacquer thinner or acetone will do the job, but I must watch out and be extremely careful not to remove the white lead ground in the process. As always, if there is any doubt when using powerful solvents, I like to experiment on a spare canvas or panel before risking unwanted results on a piece I'm trying to rescue. Whatever solvents I use, I must make sure they have completely evaporated before resuming work. Usually it's only a matter of minutes—just enough time for a milk and cookie break!

For me, these simple paintings seem to work best for life studies of living subjects or anything else involving interesting drawing opportunities and subtle tonality. The intimate quality of transparent monochrome is perfect for rendering figure drawings and portrait studies, not only because the earth pigments so closely resemble actual flesh tones, but also because they duplicate the temperature relationship of north daylight—warm darks and cool lights. I have had little luck applying this technique to scenic subjects such as landscape, where aerial perspective and atmosphere are so very important. Monochrome seems very limited in capturing effects caused by complex color changes.

I strongly recommend this way of working for anyone who needs more familiarity with manipulating oil paint. With only one color to worry about, you can concentrate on learning what a brush can do and how to wield it expertly. Without the distraction of mixing and matching a lot of colors, you will learn tonal drawing with a brush much faster. You will also become more aware of the value structures in your subject.



ROSE FRANTZEN SKETCHING (Detail), oil on panel, 16 x 22, 1987



FAWN oil on panel, 8 x 12, 1990



MAVOURNEEN oil on canvas, 18 x 12, 1996

I have always been fascinated by vintage family albums, like the ones in our family. The time period of the albums must be from late or middle 1800s, because those were the days of experimentation in photography, and there were a great many methods and results.

I particularly relished the many different warm tones that photographers produced in their prints. I loved too the fact that cameramen used mostly natural lighting before high tech flash, strobe, and other illumination came into use.

Not the least of the charms of 19th century photography was the powerful influence of painting in creating images. Add to that the ingenuous response of people having themselves photographed.

*Put all of this together, and you will understand why I feel there is a treasure in my hands whenever I look through a family album from that period. Such venerable books are a source of endless subject matter for drawings and paintings. It is a unique period in human imagery nevermore to be seen. I enjoy nothing more than taking a small very old photo and bringing it into larger life as in MAVOURNEEN at left. (Mavourneen is Irish for **darling**.)*

To create the vintage effect I work on a very smooth portrait canvas triple primed with white lead (no mineral dust if you please). I like to "kill" the stark white of my canvas with an initial wash of Cobalt Blue and Transparent Oxide Red thinned with genuine rectified turpentine. (Rectified turpentine evaporates very quickly and leaves no residue.) The rest is a matter of rendering convincingly. I must point out that working from these old photographs, a considerable level of knowledge and experience is necessary because the old photos, while fascinating, are often of very poor quality. Nevertheless, I find them to be well worth any effort.

MONOCHROME STUDY

oil on canvas, 16 x 12, 1989

Terra Rosa and Venetian Red were the colors I used most for rendering this regal portrait of a young actress. It shows how a monochrome can be used effectively if the natural color of a fully developed oil painting is not the main goal.

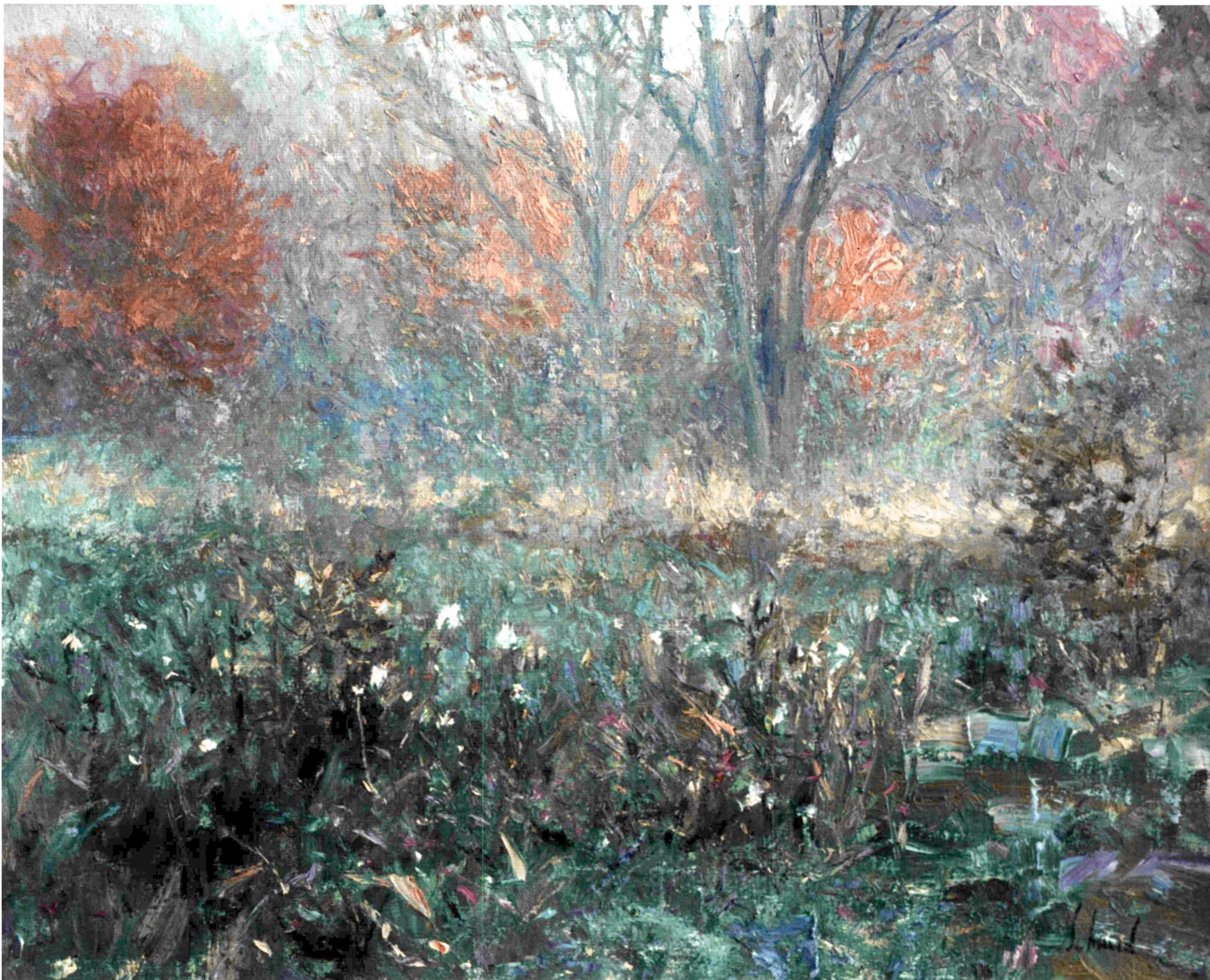
I was after her expression, and that is what I got. Full color could not have done the job better. To add just a bit of extra color quality, I first gave my canvas a very light wash of Viridian plus Transparent Oxide Red. I was careful, however, to let the mineral spirits of the wash dry thoroughly before I worked into it with my earth colors.

*The quality of the ground, like the quality of paper in a watercolor, is crucial to this way of working. A white lead ground, one that is double primed is ideal. **Acrylic gesso grounds will not do** because they stain immediately, and color cannot be removed entirely. I must be able to manipulate my paint so that I can wipe my canvas back to its white state. The extra layers of priming are also necessary if I use steel wool or fine sandpaper to obtain values or textures.*

As yet, I have found no end to the fascinating effects available with this transparent monochrome approach. It can be as bold or delicate as I choose, and it opens the door to endless opportunities for design.

Best of all perhaps, it is a superb way to learn how to draw with paint, and a splendid introduction to color temperature.





OCTOBER MORNING oil on canvas, 24 x 30, 1965

4. IMPRESSIONISTIC BLOCK-IN

I have never seen a French Impressionist painting in its beginning stages, but no matter. That wonderfully rich period of painting encompassed so many different lands, with diverse artists and individual styles, that there was no single way they all went about their work. It is likely, however, that the approach I am presenting here had its origins during that time. It certainly saw broad use in Europe and North America afterward, and it remains a great favorite with artists today. Landscape painters particularly like it because it lends itself so well to *plein air* (open air) painting where light and color in a picture are their main goals.

A BRIEF NOTE ON *IMPRESSIONISM*

The term was first coined satirically about 1872 by (in my opinion) a very short-sighted Parisian art critic reviewing a Monet work he did not approve of titled *Impression, Soleil Levant* (Sunrise Impression). In time the word became an identity tag attached to the work of almost any artist who departed from the standards of the all powerful *Académie des Beaux-Arts* and its exhibition arm, the *Salon de Paris*. Naturally, it was picked up by the media, and today erroneously includes everyone from Pissarro and Monet to Van Gogh and Matisse. That small initial art movement in France, lasting but a few years, is also credited by art critics and historians as the launching pad of modern art. That is not true either.

The reality is this: Impressionism in art was one of many simultaneous revolutions—political, social, scientific, economic, philosophical, and so on—all born of the Romantic movement still relentlessly sweeping mid-nineteenth century Europe. Freedom of expression, and self determination, along with the many other aspirations of ordinary people was at the heart of it. And so was getting out of the musty dark studios, away from the imperious *Salon*, and into the sunlight and fresh free air to paint from life in new ways.

It is no surprise then that many artists (certainly not just those in France) became passionately centered on capturing natural light and brilliant color. To aid them, they had a powerful tool: a growing understanding of the nature and behavior of light. Much was known by then about the electromagnetic spectrum, particularly the visible part we call light, and how the constituent colors of natural light interacted. The Impressionists pioneered the ways such glorious knowledge could play out on their palettes and canvases.

The most effective way they achieved some of their goals was through an amazingly simple idea—***the use of broken color***—small daubs of primary or secondary colors (Red, Yellow, Blue, Violet, Green, or Orange, plus white to alter values). Colors were laid closely together, but not smoothly blended together. That was all it was! ***But***—when those many juxtapositions were viewed from a slight distance, they produced the effect of a new and brighter color! For example, a small almond-sized brushstroke of bright red placed adjacent to a yellow one will look like a single orange brushstroke when seen from a distance of only a few feet. However, because the red and yellow are seen with the eye, then blended in the vision center of the viewer, the result is a scintillating effect almost impossible to duplicate with traditional blended methods. That was the idea. In practice it was not always entirely successful, but it was still pretty good.

Try this: Next time you visit a major museum, go first to the early Italian and Spanish Renaissance galleries, where you will see paintings of the thirteenth through sixteenth centuries (1200 to 1500). Note how generally dark the pictures are. Then stroll through more galleries of European works done in the subsequent centuries up to about 1850 or so, and notice how generally dark those pictures ***still*** are. Then see how ***suddenly*** a change comes over art when the French Impressionists appear on the scene!

See how whole rooms seem to burst into light and color when you enter galleries filled with the oil paintings of Mary Cassatt, Claude Monet, Alfred Sisley, Renoir, Degas and all the others! Note too how Impressionism worked its way into the paintings of others in that period who are not usually classified with the movement: Painters like John Singer Sargent (who painted with Monet), Joaquín Sorolla, Robert Henri, Cecilia Beaux, Elizabeth Sparhawk-Jones, Edmund Tarbell, William Merritt Chase, Paolo Michetti, Valentin Serov, Isaac Levitan, and a host of others who mastered painting from life.

MY AFFAIR WITH COLOR

This impressionistic block-in is like no other. It is the most unstructured of the ways I start a painting. Sometimes I feel I'm chasing rainbows, but it usually gets me where I wish to go. My immediate aim is to create a rough color sketch of my subject by first emphasizing the overall color harmony, while avoiding any definite commitment to exact shapes, edges, and darker values, until I arrive at something resembling a very loose Impressionist painting. When a hazy image of the subject begins to appear, I turn my attention to the more specific elements and develop them bit by bit into sharper focus, almost as if someone or something were emerging toward me from out of a lovely mist.

The process typically begins with an extravagant jumble of colors applied as a scumble over my entire canvas until I get a sense of the light I'm after. I give very little immediate attention to drawing the subject other than a few guide lines to indicate larger forms. Because of this seemingly random accumulation of paint, there is often no dividing line between the beginning and middle stages of a work. In some cases the accumulation of bits of color may be so gradual the whole painting appears to be a single flow from first stroke to signature. An observer watching the progress of such a picture might wonder when the serious painting will begin.

In most cases, this way of working is used because the effect of light and the ambient colors are the sole objectives (as they were for Twachtman and Monet). After the color statement like this has been made, some hold there may be no point in going on. Indeed, in some circles there is a belief that the addition of exact drawing or more values will destroy the brilliance of a color effect.

Personally, I can't agree with that entirely. I like vivid color, and I know from experience it is possible to retain it regardless of the extent to which a work is developed, provided of course, it is done with virtuosity (consider Sorolla). While I am as captivated as anyone by the stunning works of the Impressionists, I see no reason to habitually confine color to a broken color technique. The visual world has many other features in which color plays an indispensable role—nature is filled with precise drawing, edges, and values, and still manages to radiate more color than any of us (or the Impressionists) can or could handle.

For that reason I regard this broken color system of starting as a means to an end. It is an ideal method when the subject is so divided into small bits I cannot resolve it into simple masses, such as in landscape painting when I am sometimes confronted with a bewildering display of different colors, and very few areas of one distinct color. Moreover, there is an obvious advantage with an impressionistic block-in when the edges on my subject are indistinct or blurred, or do not lend themselves to clear outline.

In my usual version of this block-in and resulting painting, I am guided by my conviction that although careful drawing is no substitute for sound painting, it certainly is a prerequisite. For that reason, I try to at least indicate some of the more important drawing features quite soon after brushing on a wash or scumble of the dominant color. This will usually be my *color key*, the basis of the harmony of my painting. I think of it as I do the tonic note in a musical key signature. As a note of curiosity (no pun intended), there is a belief that Beethoven chose the key of F-major for his *Pastorale* symphony because it was thought to be the sound that most resembles the color Green! I leave it at that.

Returning now to serious matters: It is only when a part of the critical drawing is well-established that I can relax and decide how many of my nondescript initial strokes of color I wish to change into recognizable *things* in my subject, and which to leave as they are. In other words, I reach a point where I have to ask myself if my painting would be improved in any way by making those dabs of color look like something other than just paint. Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately), there is no straight answer. This is one of those "Art" parts of painting—a judgment call with no rationale beyond an inward heart-and-head response about what looks and feels right. I can't say how to choose a right path to follow. I must tell you, however, I have created some *very* mediocre paintings by *ignoring* my whimsical impulses.

As you may have noticed by now, the tentative nature of this block-in approach means the likelihood of drawing errors is moderately (but not fatally) high. With only little fragments of color on your canvas, you can't really tell exactly where *anything* is, how big it is, or if it is the right shape—all the things a strong clear block-in should tell you! Of course, if you are *only* interested in color, none of that matters. This seems to be the case with Monet's *Water Lilies* series, where his renditions became increasingly abstract as he aged and presumably focused solely on color, although problems with his eyesight were also present.

Therefore, if more inclusive elements do matter to you, and you like your work to be more clearly drawn, this easygoing method demands a little extra care and a bit of experience to visualize the subject details within the impressionist maze. You can do this right away by measuring for the key points on your subject and making marks or lines of some kind on the canvas to give yourself at least the more important references. Obviously your painting probably will require some reworking before everything ends up where it belongs. (Which is why many of the Impressionistic paintings appear so labored when viewed up close.)

Just be especially careful when your subjects are people, because errors in drawing when using broken color can make your subject look a bit askew. In landscape painting though, you can get away with almost anything provided no one decides to go out and compare your painting to the actual subject.

All of this aside, the persistent challenge I face throughout every stage of this type of painting is to continually retain the freshness of the colors I established at the start (meaning they remain clearly recognizable as belonging to a color family).

Color, after all, is the prime reason for choosing this method in the first place. Sometimes the attempt can produce a truly dazzling mess—but when it works, it *REALLY* works! It's definitely worth adding to your repertoire of skills.



WILD APPLES
oil on canvas,
10 x 18, 1991



ASPEN GROVE - Stage one



ASPEN GROVE - Stage two



ASPEN GROVE - Stage three

Stage one shows the impressionistic block-in for this painting in its final form, ready for the finishing colors. At this point it is entirely a transparent wash rendering, looking somewhat like a broken color watercolor sketch. Notice too that the temperature relationship within the painting (cool lights, warmer darks) has been suggested in most of the block-in.

In Stage two you can see the upper portion of the group of aspens beginning to receive some serious attention both to the drawing and the color changes in the leaves. My goal in this work was to convey the intense blue-green harmony of the forest, and much of the block-in work will remain visible between my finishing brushstrokes as a kind of repeating harmonic note like a continuo in music.

Stage three and the completed work opposite speak for themselves. Both are simply continuations of the finishing direction I started in Stage two. The rest of the painting was a matter of working out the details of drawing, edges, and final value accents. I like to work this way whenever a subject has a strong harmony I can focus on. Starting out with a full color wash is a way of having my painting sing on key, so to speak, from the beginning.



ASPEN GROVE oil on canvas, 22 x 28, 1989



FREAK HOUSE oil on panel, 8 x 12, Riverview Park, Chicago, 1960

As you can see from the dates on the paintings above and opposite, these are very early works in my landscape painting adventures. It was a time after my days in art school, when having learned about Impressionism and its familiar offspring, broken color, I became immersed in the dazzling world of color and color harmony. FREAK HOUSE was one of the attractions at Riverview Park, a place of honky-tonk, thrill rides, and side shows, located in Chicago. For an artist looking for color it was heaven indeed! I painted there as often as I could, and never ran out of great subject matter. The joy of it for me was the opportunity to learn about and use broken color, because at Riverview Park everything looked like a French Impressionist painting in real life.



IVAN'S HOUSE oil on panel, 8 x 12, Connecticut, 1967

It is clear from IVAN'S HOUSE that in my reckless youth, I sometimes went into hyperspace with the harmony—but it was all part of my learning process. All things considered, I don't think I stretched the boundaries of credibility any more than Monet or Renoir did at times. As you can see in most of the other works in this volume, I mellowed considerably, but I hope not timidly. I still love pushing myself to new places with color.

As I matured in my use of color, I realized that in real life, that is to say, when almost anything visible is examined closely enough, the most ordinary of subjects is a supermarket of dazzling color. In a sense, painting is like shopping for color with your rich daddy's credit card.



DAY OF THE PAINTER oil on canvas, 12 x 24, Connecticut, 1967

In case you are wondering, yes, that is me in my painting. I have never seen myself from the back, so I had to make up someone who was tall and thin from memory of other paintings where people were actually part of the subject. There is a serious side to placing myself in this picture, mainly that a human in the painting automatically gives scale to everything else. The size I am painted and where I placed myself within the picture area tells a viewer how big the trees are, how far away the distant pasture and hills are, and how far I am (in the picture) from the viewer of my picture. This is true whenever something of a known size, such as the doorway of a house, an automobile, a horse or a mouse, is in the landscape.

*Of course it is not absolutely necessary that a viewer be provided with clues about the size of things. In many landscapes it either doesn't matter, or the landscape is familiar enough to be self-evident. In landscapes where color is the **only** concern, it obviously doesn't matter what the colored elements are. In the case of familiarity with the landscape, such as knowing how big certain trees or animals or mountains are, no extra clues are necessary. Regarding my painting above, I believe the mood I captured of a late summer afternoon in the quiet Berkshire foothills in Connecticut would have been enough, but when I placed the figure to see what would happen, the whole scene was transformed and became lucid. When I fooled a bit with the paint that became me, and put a box in one hand and what looks like an easel in the other, and gave the figure my thinness and slouch, I became immortal, or at least raised the cost of the painting.*

MULE DEER

oil on canvas, 20 x 16, Colorado, 1987

It was only as I was completing this painting of a western mule deer, that I realized its similarity to John Singer Sargent's work "The Hermit." I don't know about John's painting, but mine was obviously done from a photograph.

Another difference, I think, is that John intended in his painting to render it so that certain key elements are not immediately apparent, but the whole work is at first seen as a sun-spotted forest. It is what I respectfully call a double-take illusion, where only at second glance do you see the hermit, then you notice a deer, and at a fourth glance, yet another deer, and so on.

I was fortunate when living at a high altitude in the Colorado Rocky Mountains to have a small herd of these beautiful creatures as regular visitors outside my studio. I was lucky to have studied comparative anatomy in the same time period I was in life class at The American Academy in Chicago. It was a pleasure then to sketch the live deer instead of merely working from pictures in an anatomy book.

My intention here was to show the deer not as a figure apart from the landscape, but rather a part of the landscape itself. To do this I had to integrate the pattern of light on the deer in such a way that she seemed to be growing out of the forest with everything else. It was wonderful once my painting started to become organized, and I could play with the patches of color while at the same time create a strong but not immediately obvious pattern.



5. FULL COLOR ACCURATE BLOCK-IN

I prefer this starting method and the following one on page 102 for most of my work. Even though the two methods are not exactly the same, both are ways to get into serious painting from the very beginning. If I am careful, there will be only a modicum of correcting or extensive overpainting of my initial work.

Both methods require a *very clear* idea in my mind of the picture I wish to create. I began this *full color* block-in with a light tone applied as a turpentine wash and light scumble over my entire canvas—a subdued shade of the general color harmony of the subject. Once it set enough, I applied the general colors and values of the larger masses immediately. There was no trying this or that, or fooling with timid approximations. I selected the prominent shapes and painted them carefully, but as non-detailed as I could.

In many cases, such as this, I simplify things down to their essentials, almost as if I'm doing a poster image. As much as possible, I do this with the actual values, colors, and edges. I move on to do the adjoining shapes in the same way, then the ones that border each of those (like I'm laying bricks), and so on until all the remaining major shapes have been painted in their proper places, and joined together with their appropriate edges.

If all goes well, and if I manage to sustain my effort without a major blunder, the result will be a full color block-in, such as you see below, which is a no-frills image, true to the subject in every respect except minor details, *and* those special final touches that can turn a painting into a work of art—like the whipped cream on strawberry shortcake. That, at least, is always my hope.

Experience has taught me to go easy with my paint during this type of block-in. I hold back on the thickness of my paint because there are always a lot of adjustments with drawing to be made before I get things right, and thick paint at this stage can lead to a real mess. Generally, I use my pigments sparingly at first, using larger flat bristle brushes to scumble and scrub the paint on thinly. Then when the block-in is finished, it is easy for me to go in and apply paint of any desired thickness (within reason) to achieve my textural effects and have fun with all the magical little color nuances.

By keeping my paint to a minimum at first, I have a choice of making those effects either complex or quiet in detail. In working out the fine points, I have to be wary of losing the strength of the simple masses of the block-in. To prevent this, I must *always* ask myself if it is clearly necessary to *divide* those large shapes. If it is not, I leave them alone. Why? Because each time an otherwise strong shape is divided, it is to some degree weakened. If I decide that subdividing or developing detail is essential for clarity, or to make my point, I make every effort to do so *without* significantly altering the overall value of the area. Maintaining the one original value of the simple masses is the key to keeping them strong.



LEFT

WILLOWS, the completed block-in.

OPPOSITE, TOP

WILLOWS, detail of the block-in showing the initial brushwork and preparation for the finishing process.

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM

WILLOWS, completed. All things considered, I feel this is a strong painting, but it is also obvious that I traded some of the freshness of the block-in stage in favor of detail. Well, live and learn.



WILLOWS oil on canvas, 24 x 48, 1994



EXETER COTTAGE - Start



EXETER COTTAGE - Half finished

In this painting I bypassed most of the customary preliminaries and started blocking-in immediately with accurate drawing, color, values, and edges (but not necessarily small detail). The mist of England's serene Devon countryside provided me with ready-made soft edges. The clear white value of the house in the center made a perfect pattern for my design, and the architectural features of the structure gave me the classic shapes (drawing elements) and simple values that I needed. The cottage in that misty field presented itself as a perfect picture waiting to be painted.

There was very little I had to figure out or change. I began, as you see in the two images at left, in the center of my canvas with the larger shapes of the main house, and worked outwards, finishing as I went along.

I realize now that I should have quit sooner than I did. In fact, if I had to do it over again, I would probably render the foreground with less detail. I would also have made better use of the diagonal line in the foreground of the lower image as a lead-in compositional line.

One of the most frustrating, but genuine truths I have learned in my years at painting is this: I have learned that beyond a given point, usually just past the block-in (but only if it is a very good block-in), most additional work tends to weaken the strength of my painting. That clear fact argues soundly for getting it right at the start, or at least, recognizing where the strength lies in the initial work, and then preserving that at all cost throughout the remainder of the painting.

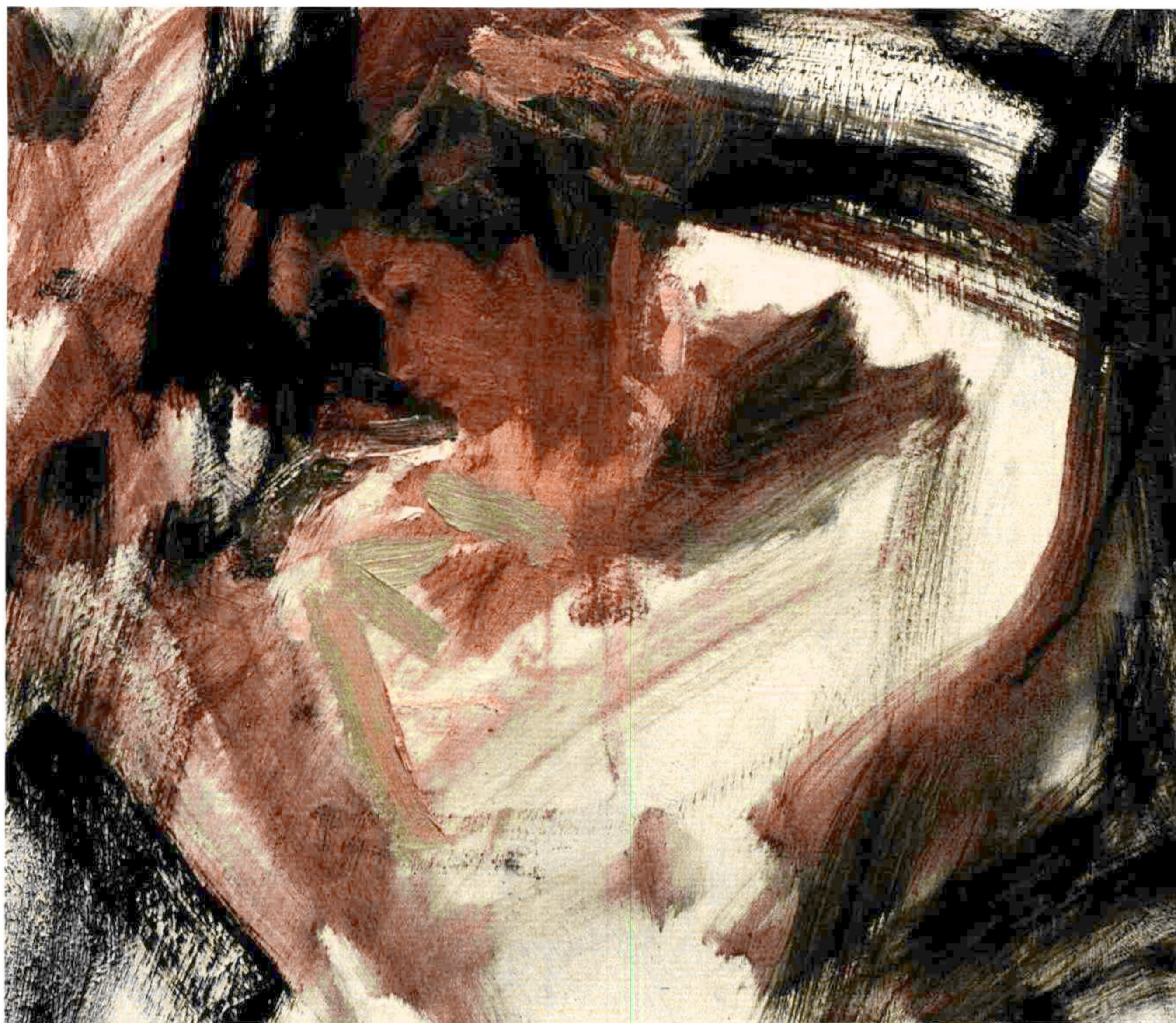


EXETER COTTAGE oil on canvas, 24 x 40, 1994

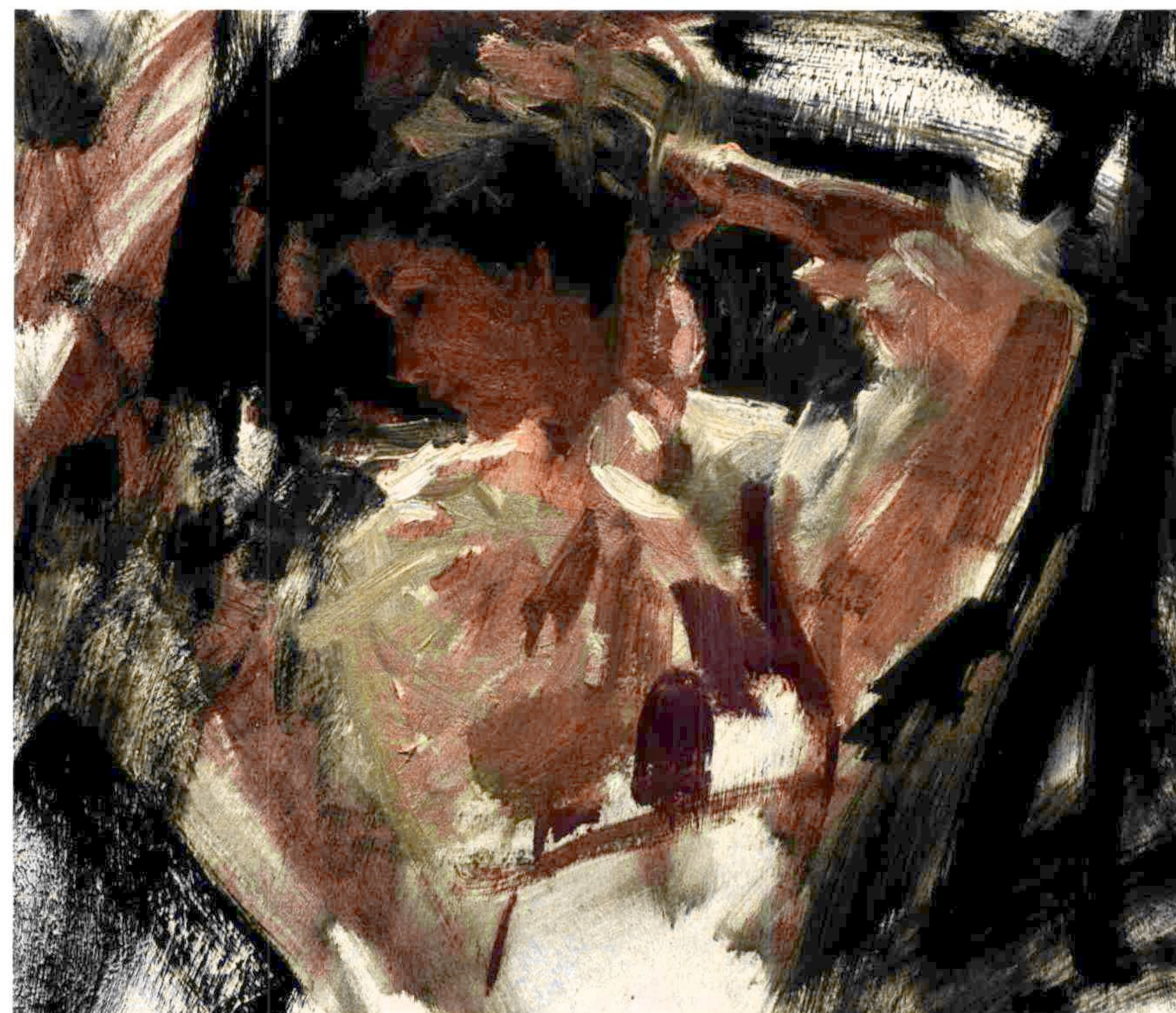
*The only difference between this and the methods on the following pages is that here I am concerned at the start with the larger shapes of the subject at the beginning, while in the next I go after everything **including** detail.*

Both of these very direct approaches are vulnerable to error because there is very little preliminary work, such as preliminary drawing, to rely upon. Therefore, I must be very careful with each stroke I apply because the next one after that depends on its accuracy, and so on down the line for each subsequent brushstroke. The sequence here is a typical example of the principle of the “laying of bricks” comparison I love to repeat: when a bricklayer builds a wall, each brick starting with the very first bottom brick must be level and plumb. If it is not, all of the bricks above it, no matter how well laid, will be crooked and will eventually collapse.

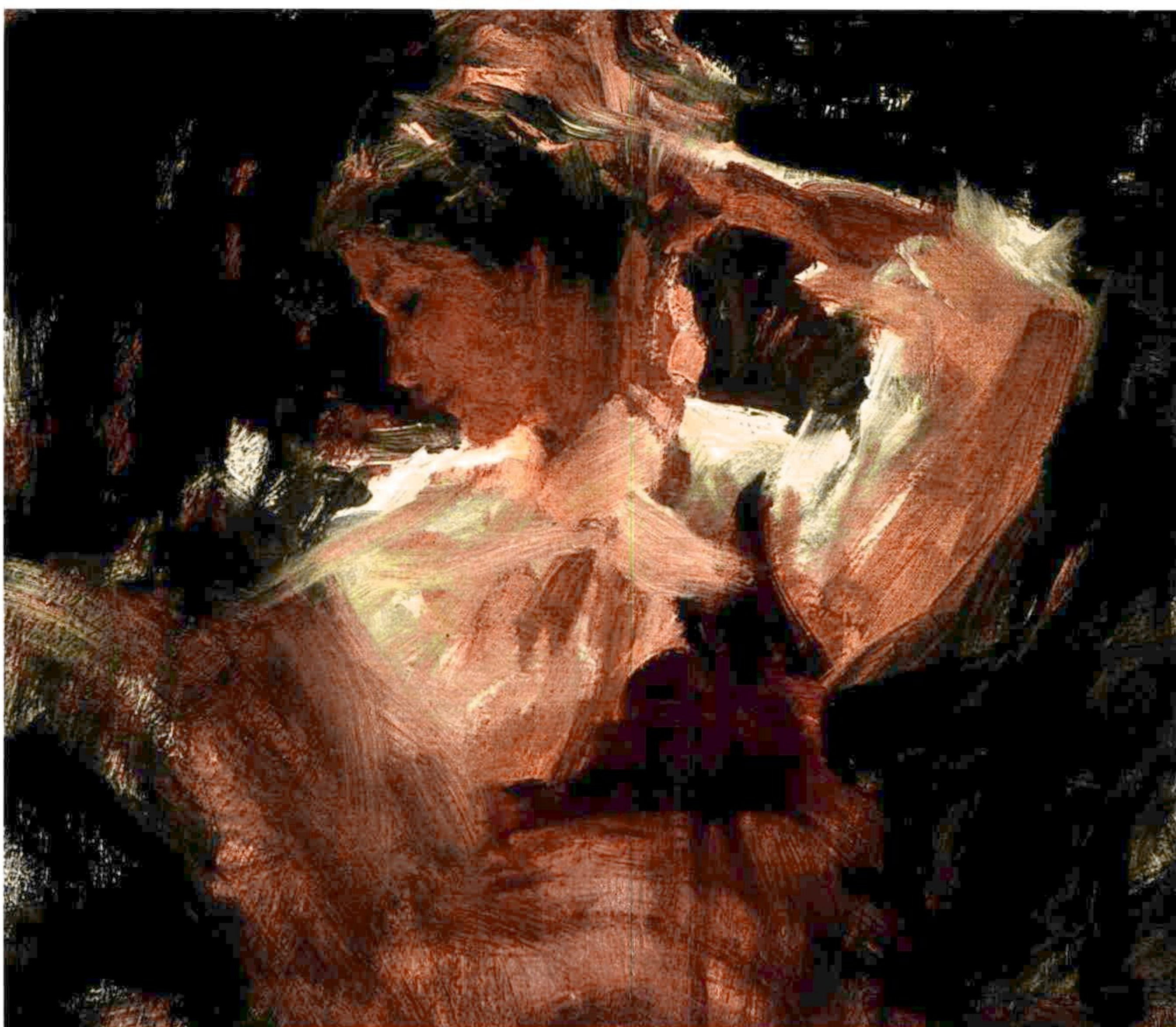
Obviously this way of starting will not do for large complex compositions. It works only when the subject is relatively simple—something that can be easily visualized, and one that requires a minimum amount of preliminary work.



Stage one



Stage two



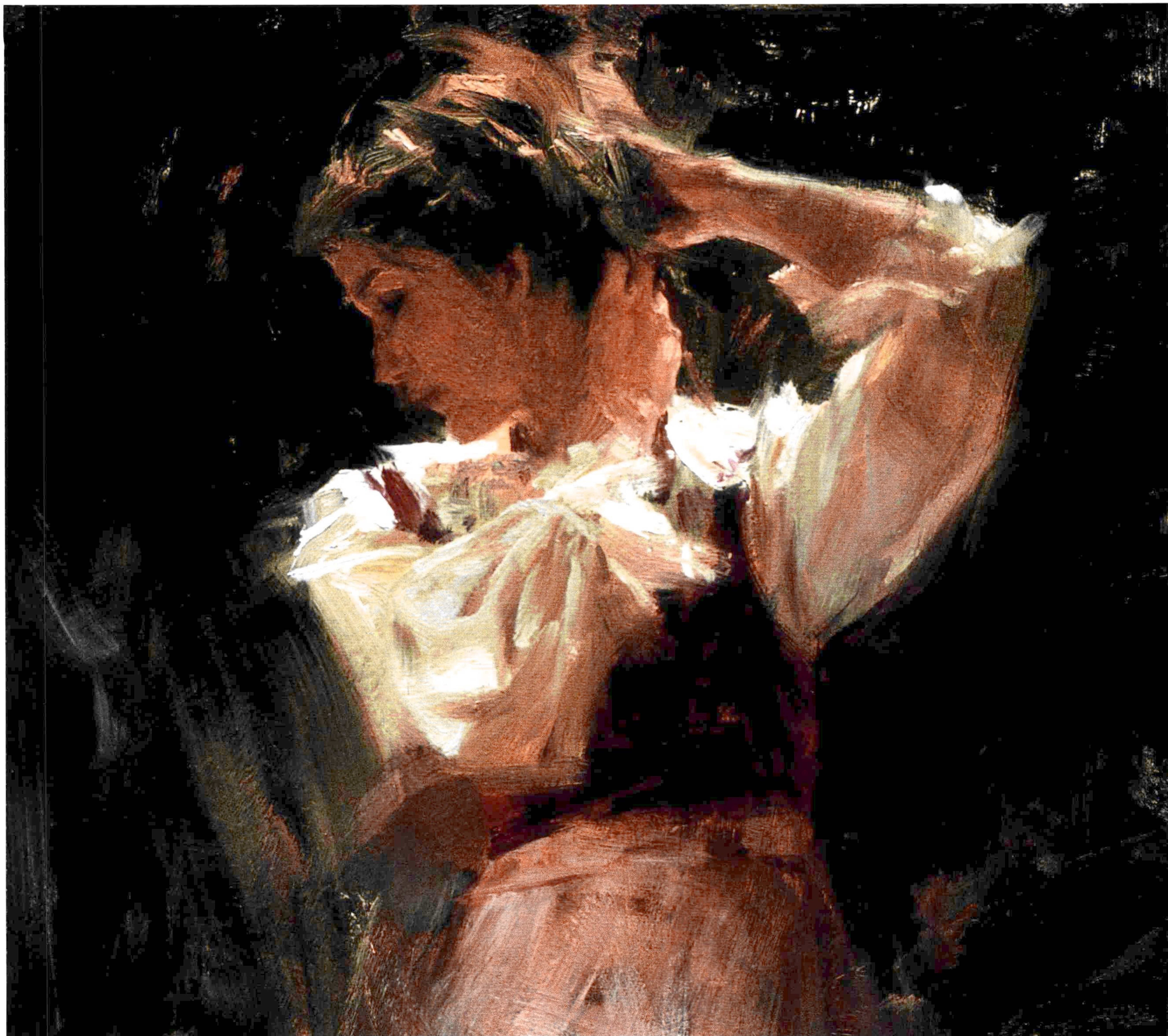
Stage three

This very quick sketch of Helga (and it had to be fast because of the pose) was one of those paintings which seem to unfold effortlessly. The painting is basically a few, large, clear-cut shapes.

They are the following: On either side of the figure are two large dark values which make up the background and the dark portion of the hair. Then two more very light shapes for the puffy sleeves and minor lights on the model's hair, collar, and hands. A third middle tone for flesh tones in shadow and lower skirt, and finally the dark wine-colored shape of her bodice.

That's only six major shapes to deal with in doing my block-in. I also chose to render this as loosely as possible so as not to become involved in time-consuming detail. I felt the most important aspect of this pose was the graceful sweep of her arms and the concentration of light upon her hands and hair.

The bright hard-edged palette knife strokes to show the brilliant light on either side of her collar set off the softer, more fluid brushwork of the painting in general. For some reason I kept thinking about strawberry shortcake as I was painting my friend Helga.



SKETCH OF HELGA oil on canvas, 10 x 12, 1969

6. SELECTIVE START (Or, The Big Bang Method)

So far, we have explored starting systems involving gradual approaches. All have some version of a block-in to serve as a road map—in other words, they are about *going from a whole to its parts*. I have presented some effective ways to do this, ways which allow us to approach the intricacies of a subject in digestible steps, while always keeping the eventual goal in mind. These cautious, flexible, and quite successful methods make good sense considering the amount of other information to be dealt with when creating a painting. I offer them because they have always served myself and many others well. I continue to use them as the various needs in starting my paintings present themselves. I did not invent these methods. They have been around for a long time because they are logical, so it was inevitable they *had* to happen (like the idea of drawing a straight line first before you saw a board in half).

The *selective start* I am describing here is not something I learned in school. It simply evolved along the way as my painting skills developed. It is quite different from what I have presented thus far. It is about going *from the parts to the whole*. I call it "selective" because typically, I *select* a small part of my subject, finish it, select the adjoining part, finish that, select the next, do the same, and so on-and-on with all the parts, until they are all joined and my painting awaits my signature. I know it sounds a little nuts, but with the right subject and circumstances, it works! It's great entertainment too at cocktail parties.

A number of years ago I asked myself why it was *always* necessary to paint something almost right, or almost complete, and then correct or complete it. (Meaning a block-in.) I wondered why I had to wait for a block-in to happen before I could cut loose and have fun with the subsequent stages of a painting, and explore all the elements in the subject at once. Why couldn't the first serious strokes of a painting be correct *and* complete in drawing, edges, value, and color, and be what I wanted to see on my canvas? Why couldn't the next strokes also be like that? And all the rest? And so on.

The answer was—no reason at all! If I could see the colors and shapes of a subject well enough to *correct* them, then it made sense I could also get them right the *first* time, and thus eliminate the *almost-right* stage! All I had to do was be very exacting about how I looked at my subject, and then equally fastidious and patient about what went onto my canvas. And, oh yes, perhaps most importantly, I must have a *very clear* image in my mind, a sort of conceptual block-in, to guide my steps.

So now whenever it is possible (and many times it is not), I try to paint each little shape on my subject as carefully as I can from the start. I do it in as finished a way as possible, and I use each correct color shape to guide me in painting all adjoining shapes. I build my picture in this way, like laying bricks, from a single accurate point, painting outward from that center, until I have the painting I want before me. Afterwards, it is a matter of pulling the whole thing together—mopping up so to speak—softening edges here and there, scrutinizing it for drawing errors (most often mistakes in alignment), eliminating unnecessary value changes, and checking the overall design for simplicity. Then I'm done.

There are no rigid rules or formal do-it-by-the-numbers nonsense when it comes to starting a painting. Think of the block-in ideas as little water wings handed to you by a dear friend who has just shoved you into very cold deep water. Each of us adjusts to such a situation in our own way. Some thrash around and yell for help, some dog-paddle to safety, a few learn to swim and become Olympic champions. Others simply drown.

When you begin a painting just stay calm. Imagine your finished painting, and you should float right to it.



LILY SKETCH oil on canvas, 8 x 16, 2004 (Demonstration)

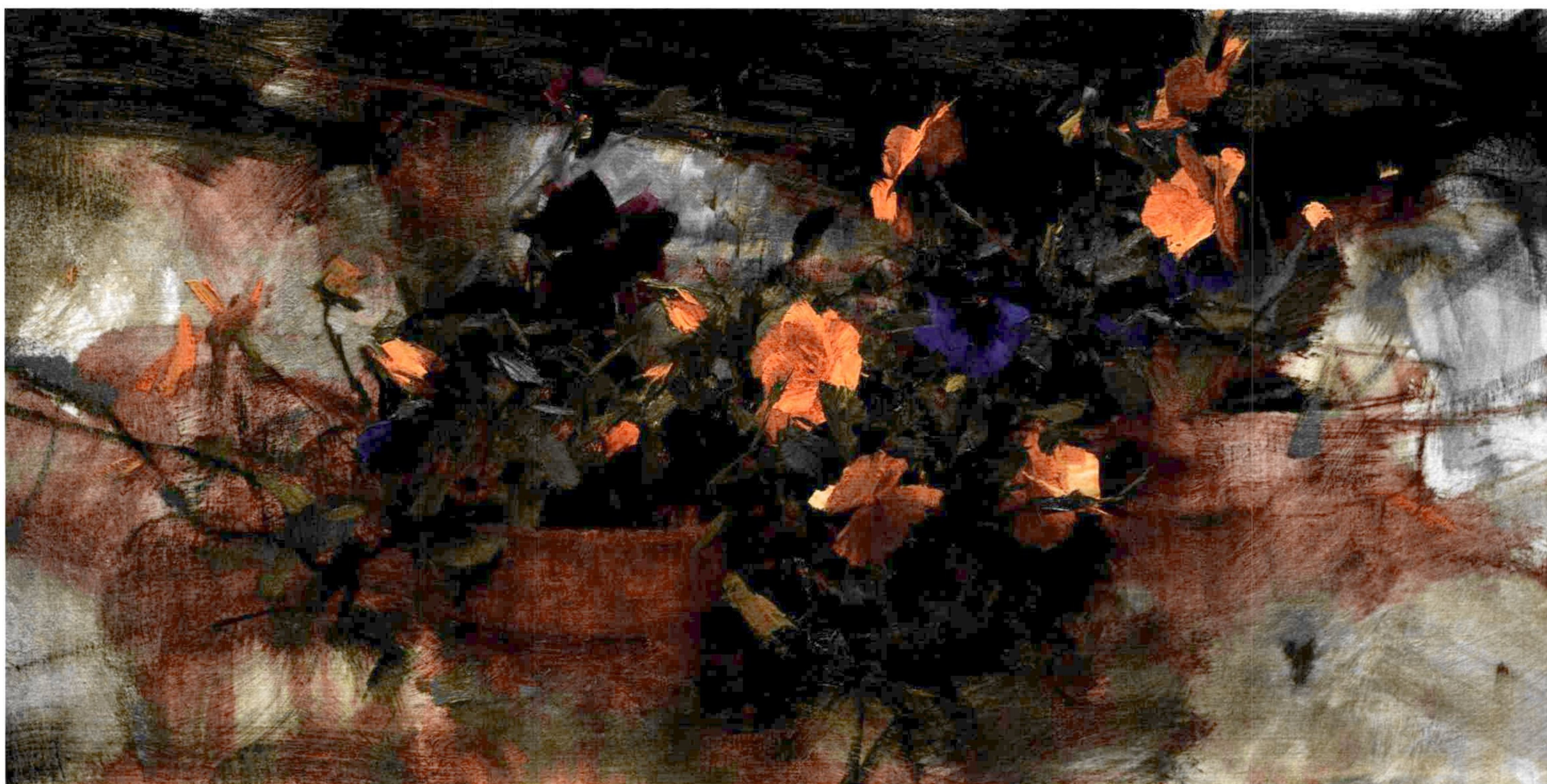
I painted this study one summer afternoon several years ago as a quick little demonstration for my friend, the artist Stephanie Birdsall. After finishing one flower painting that morning in our studio gardens with our Putney Painters group, I hoped to just hang around after lunch with a cool lemonade and dispense free advice for the rest of the day. I made a comment to Stephanie and my friends that the key to painting flowers is to apply simple, bold brushwork, using as much as possible only white and colors as pure as they come from the tube, avoiding all unnecessary messing around with the clean, one-stroke brush and palette knife applications made at the start. And so, as these situations always go, it was easier to show my friends what I meant rather than try to describe it in words.

A Selective start was the perfect way to make my point. After a quick toning of the canvas with a bit of Transparent Oxide Red and Viridian, and six or eight bold semi-transparent brown and green strokes for a background, I was ready for the real demonstration. It wasn't much. I did the few slashes of various greens for the leaves very slowly. (Count them.) Then came a half-dozen pure Cadmium Yellow strokes for the sunlight on the lily blossoms, some Cadmium Yellow and Viridian for the lilies' shadows. Then a bit of Cadmium Orange, Cadmium Red, and Terra Rosa for the partially open lilies. I topped it off with four small palette knife dabs of Cobalt Violet Genuine. (Sixty-five bucks a tube, Yikes!!)

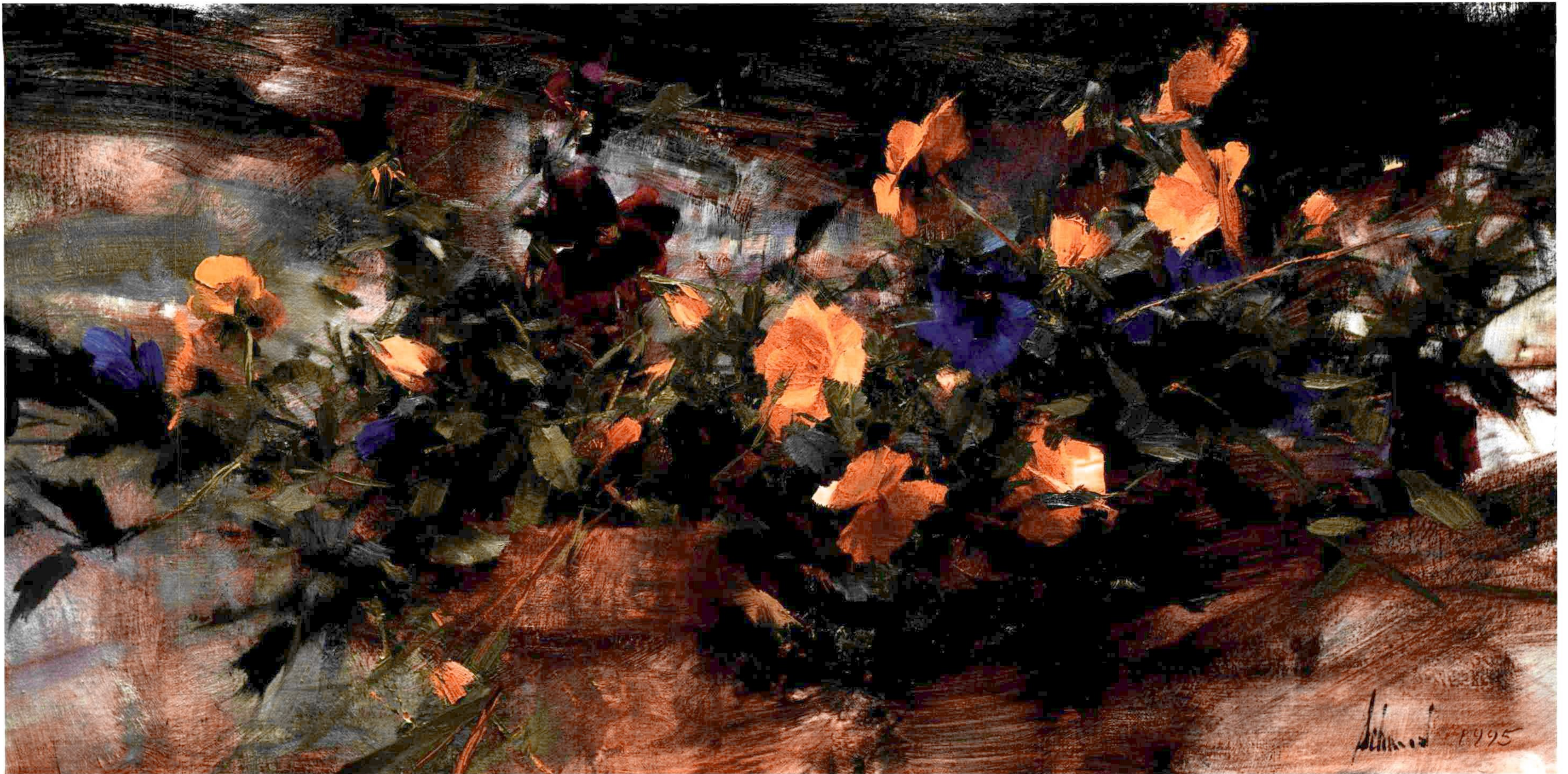
In all truth, it was pretty easy because I had painted the same group of lilies earlier, so I had in effect worked out any problems during my morning "rehearsal." The real key though was knowing exactly what I wanted to get across to my companions, and then working very slowly and carefully, explaining my thinking and method before entering each stage of the process.



PANSIES - Stage one



PANSIES - Stage two



PANSIES oil on canvas, 12 x 24, 1995

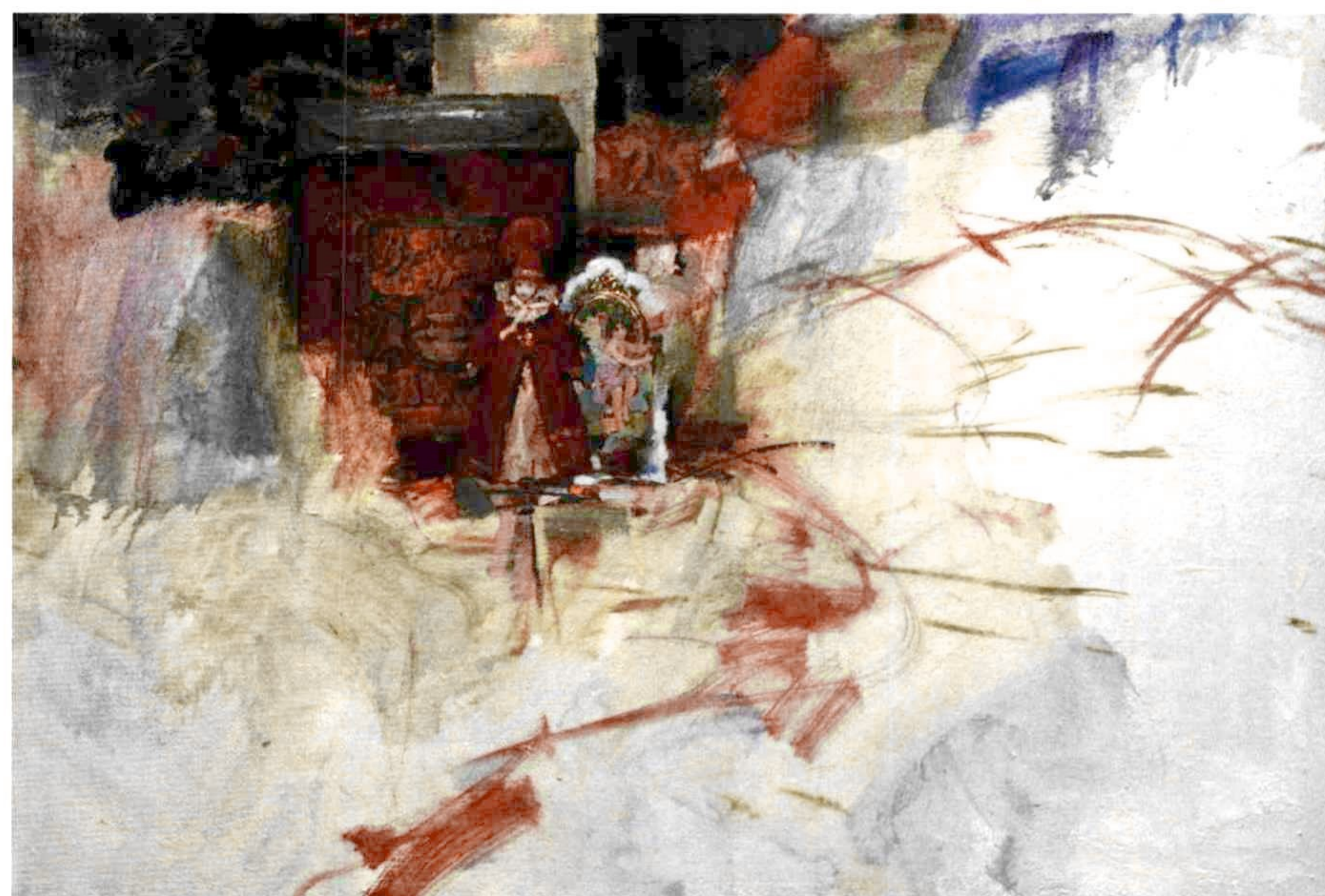
*In Stage one of PANSIES on the opposite page I began by covering my canvas with a cool turpentine wash of Transparent Oxide Brown and Cobalt Blue, varying the application to make it look **active** rather than a boring flat tone. Before the wash was entirely dry, I added the dark across the top, and the brown tone in the center. With only minimum preparation I went into what I call my finishing mode, and painted to completion three of the group of the larger pansy blossoms. Note that those flowers, plus the three smaller yellow petals, and all of the leaves and blossoms in Stage two have remained untouched in the Final stage above.*

You can see in Stage two how little remains to be done to bring my composition to the fulfillment of a finished painting. The strength of accurate drawing, and the full range of values and colors rendered from the very first brushstrokes, produces a joyfully satisfying statement right away. Paintings like these almost seem to talk to me in the sense that each portion, large or small, that I finish completely is in fact telling me not only what to do next, but what size, shape, and color the following parts need to be. This is largely because the correct work already in place gives me a reliable source of information from which to compare everything else to come.

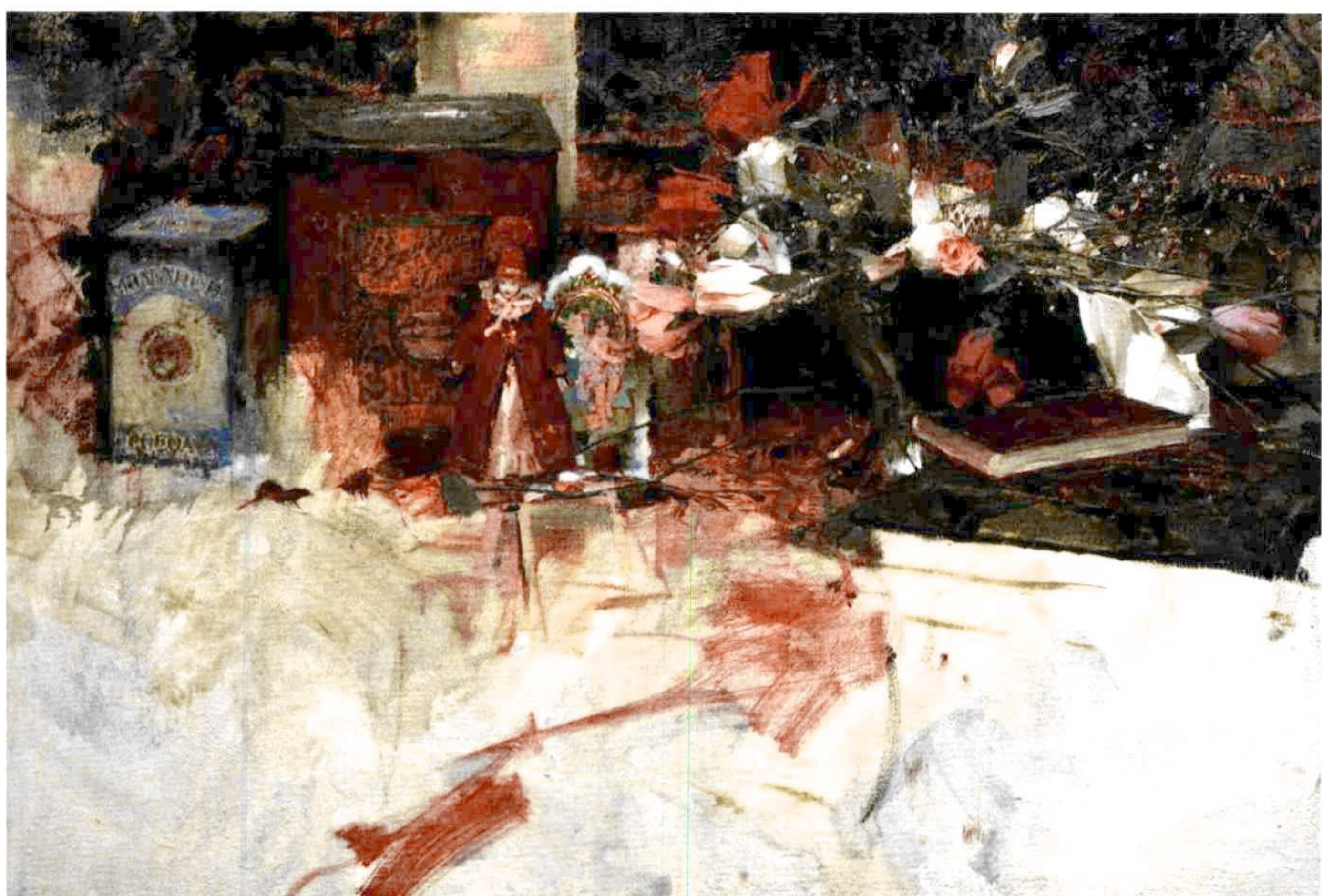
*Still life subjects are ideal for developing skills for this kind of painting. A still life never has to take a break, or get home to a husband and kids to make supper. Occasionally flowers will wilt, but there are ways around that. Still life allows you to take your time and do things right. **You** are always in charge. **You** get to decide what to paint, and how you wish to arrange and light it. It is always there for you. Bon appétit!*



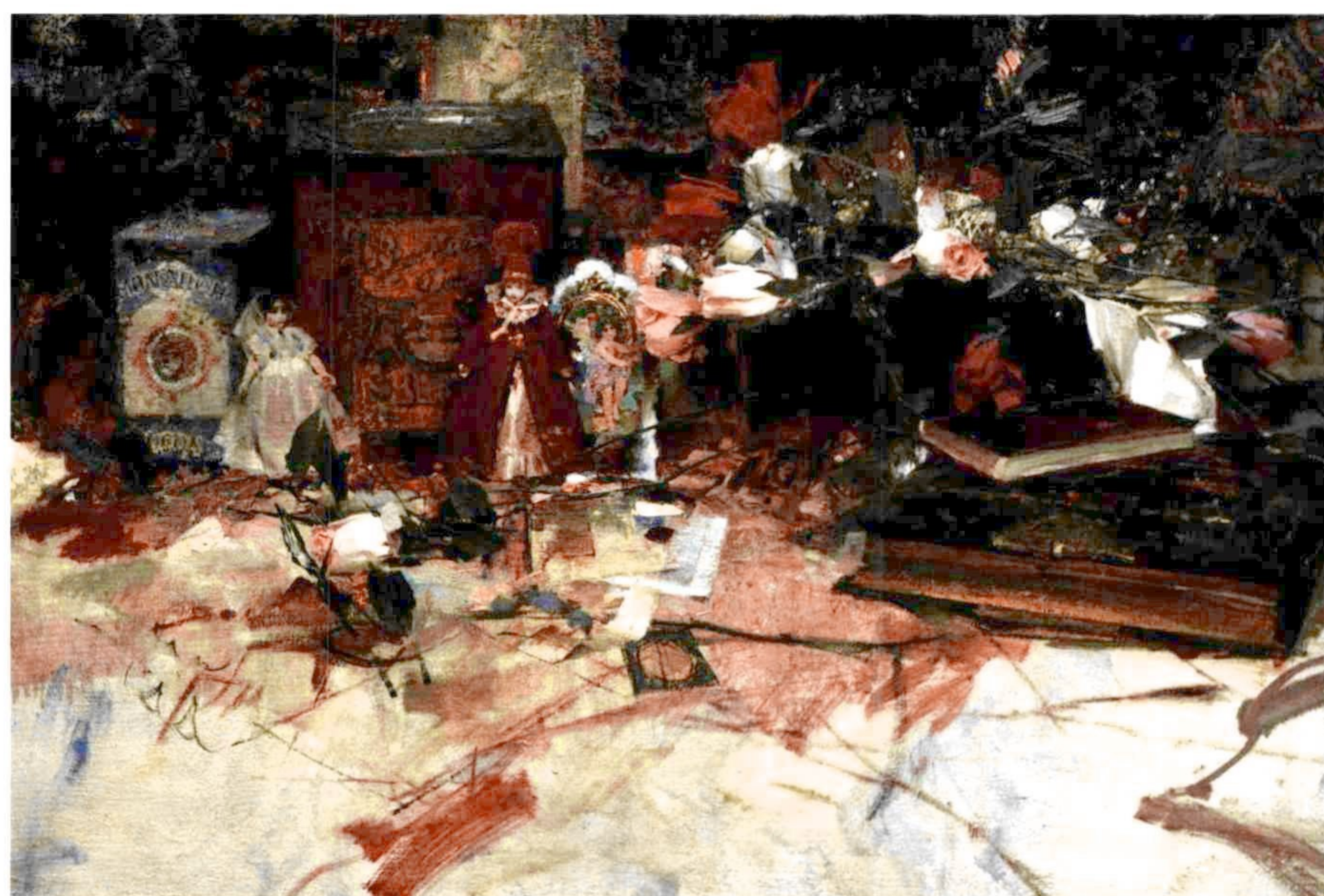
RUSSIAN DOLL - Stage one



RUSSIAN DOLL - Stage two



RUSSIAN DOLL - Stage three



RUSSIAN DOLL - Stage four

Stage one shows the first half hour or so as I planned the lines of my composition. In stage two additional elements of the painting have been inserted, not as part of a sketchy block-in, but rather as finished renderings. Stage three shows my continuation of finishing work in the upper half of my painting. At this stage I had been working for almost four hours. In this type of starting, the work (the speed at which I apply paint), is much slower than in the more general type of block-ins. Stage four is when I had to face what for me is usually the most difficult area in a still life—the foreground. I made a decision at that point to ignore the red diagonal and place objects in the area instead. In retrospect I am undecided whether or not filling up the foreground with things was a wise choice, but Nancy assures me that following my instinct was the right path.



RUSSIAN DOLL oil on canvas, 20 x 30, 1989

This way of working cannot be done casually. It calls for the utmost in concentration, but it is definitely worth the effort, or at the very least, it is something to shoot for. It is hard to exaggerate the advantages of having a variety of starting techniques at one's disposal. Unquestionably, a flexible response to the demands of subject matter and conditions is better than having only a single individualistic style of working, however satisfying that may be to the ego. I consider fidelity to my perception of a subject is the whole point of working from life. I believe I ought to paint what I see. Real life, whether it's a landscape, or a person, or still life, presents an incomparable visual banquet, and capturing it faithfully the way I see it can be a stunning experience. To diminish that by subordinating it to a safe and set routine that everyone can recognize as mine makes no sense to me.



Stage one

For this work I envisioned an Oriental look for my painting, like that of perhaps a Japanese or Chinese screen rendering. It was almost completed at one of our regular Putney Painter sessions. Minor finishing touches were done in my studio.

The evening before, I prepared my canvas by giving it a transparent tone to simulate the silken look I was after for my background. For this I used a mixture of Transparent Oxide Brown and Viridian thinned with Meyer medium and pure spirits of turpentine. The mixture when first applied was very dark, but I did not start rubbing it to the lighter state immediately. I waited until the wash I applied had “set up,” which means the turpentine had evaporated to the point where I could control the creation of values selectively. In this case I wanted darker values at the top of my canvas and lighter at the bottom.



Stage two

The surface of my canvas had not completely dried from my preparation of the night before. It was in fact still slightly tacky, which was perfect for creating the Orchid blossoms dancing across the center of my canvas.

The intention, as you see at left was to achieve the values and drawing of the Orchids solely by wiping away the initial wash using paper towels, small brushes, and some Q-tips.

My experience in working with transparent monochrome paintings, as described earlier in this chapter on pages 84 through 89, was invaluable in achieving the look of delicate painting on silk.

I also had many years of experience in creating transparent wash block-ins when I was a student of Bill Mosby in Chicago.

Stage three

On the right is the nearly completed phase of the purely transparent work. I could not resist placing a bit of Cadmium Scarlet and Cadmium Yellow Deep at the center point of the larger blossom.

It was essential throughout the entire rendering to preserve as much of the initial transparent wash as possible. When it was scratched or disturbed by accident, it was very difficult to restore the wash as evenly as it was originally applied. I was careful to use my cane as a hand rest to keep from inadvertently touching any part of the canvas except the orchid blossoms.

While I was drawing, I was also mindful of the shape of the background spaces immediately behind the white of the flowers—the so-called “negative spaces” essential to any elegant design.



Image of my set-up

This photo shows my subject on the far right, my painting to my left, and the cane I use to steady my hand hooked over the back of the picture.

I wanted to show this view so you may see my subject and picture together. Note how I was not simply painting everything before me, but rather selecting from the set up to create a highly designed version of it.

This is the first time I have ever painted an orchid. My only other encounter with orchids involved buying one for my date on prom night, and being extra careful not to stick my girlfriend while pinning it on her dress.

I knew even at this stage, that I would be able to capture far more than any camera, because the technique of wiping away paint to create my image is a product of my imagination (for which there is no button on a camera).





Stage four

With the transparent part completed, the delight of color and more distinctive drawing took over. I remember my sense of anticipation for the color surprises to come, and a growing sense of direction about the remainder of the painting taking hold.

I knew at this stage exactly what I needed to support the flowers, which at this point are still suspended in mid air. (In the beginning I wasn't at all sure about the bottom half of the picture.)

Notice here that I have all but completed the opaque painting of the large blossom and below it one leaf of a small geranium plant. That leaf will be part of the greenery structure below the orchids.

As I added new shapes and colors, I was still being careful to stay within the precise drawing and edges of each item in order to minimize any disturbance of the transparent background.



Stage five

This is what I meant above in referring to "the delight of color and more distinctive drawing."

Working my way along this stem of blossoms was like watching Degas' ballet dancers at practice. The color changes and shapes seemed almost endless in variety and changing color families.

I knew of course that as I worked down toward the tip of the main stem that each blossom was less mature in its unfolding than the one before it. I also invented little things which could be part of the Orchid complex (but were not actually there), in order to provide further delights.

As a note of Botanical interest, I have been made aware that these particular air plants form their blossoms as mimics of the butterflies that pollinate them—which makes me want to start painting butterflies.



ORCHID oil on canvas, 14 x 20, 2010

*Above, you see the completed fantasy, but one selectively constructed and painted from real life. Nancy says it is like a whole motion picture condensed into a flash of color and form as a painting. It is a combination of what **was** there, what **could** have been there, and by their absence, all the things I chose **not** to include.*



NORTH GARDEN PEONIES oil on canvas, 18 x 18, 2006

THE AESTHETICS OF STARTING

Aesthetics *n.* - *from Greek philosophy* (mostly Aristotle); questions about perception, beauty, art, and so on.

Up to this point, my comments have been mostly about the technical aspects of starting—how the visual properties in a subject are tangibly perceived, and ways to approach them. All of this is very necessary of course, but before **ART** can even begin to happen, all of us must answer a most fundamental question when we pick up our brushes and take aim at our canvas:

WHY DO IT?

Having the answer to this question is vital. Painting, after all, isn't like mountain climbing. You don't do it just because the subject is *there*. The beginning is the time when you should bring to full awareness all your perceptions and feelings toward your subject, and then make up your mind about what you intend to convey. Simply liking what is before you is not enough. Ask the all important question about *what* underlying response within you compelled you to have to paint it. What fires did it light? What in your life experiences came rushing forth when you first saw what you have decided now to paint?

It might be a certain color effect, or atmospheric mood, or a facial expression. It might be something internally evocative, such as a memory, or emotion, or something philosophical or spiritual. It could be a social message, or even (God forbid) political or financial. It is *your* choice, and you must be clear about it within yourself, and then make it happen!

Whatever it is—nail it! Fix it in your mind as the **ONE** thing above all else you must capture. I said earlier this does not come in paint tubes, nor does it reside purely in your technical skills. It springs from your feelings! Your skills are treasures, yet they are only your tools. At the heart of every creative act or performance, in any of the arts, there is far more than just technical mastery. Whatever that *something* is, we will never know, much less define. Your feelings, more than anything else are what make you human. Your poetic destination must hover over your purely technical efforts like a nagging guardian angel, prodding you to *not forget* the song you are singing. If you've never thought of yourself as a passionate person, this is a good time to give it a try.

Use your inner vision and the rationality of your emotions to set up your subject, or choose vantage points from the wealth of ideas in your imagination, and then guide the emphasis in your work so your idea comes through clearly and unmistakably from whatever makes you tick. Within the bounds of fidelity to the subject, there is endless latitude for self-expression in accomplishing that.

Even when you have no choice about the subject, if you are a student in an art class, for example, and the instructor picks the model and sets the pose, there is richness to be found, because it rests not in the subject, but in the way *you* experience your subject. Surely there will always be something in you that responds in a human way—something that resonates with the subject (even if it is negative). So look within yourself and find out what it is. If you draw a blank, check to see if you are still breathing.

Remember—you and your mind are ultimately the real subject of your art regardless of what you paint!

So when you do set out to paint—DO IT LIKE YOU REALLY MEAN IT!

And do not ask yourself, “*What* do I see?” Rather ask, “What do *I* see?”



PAUL MULLALLY (Detail), oil on canvas, 18 x 24, 1989

This quick sketch of my friend, the artist Paul Mullally, was painted as a demonstration in 1989 at the Palette and Chisel Academy in Chicago. I chose this to open my chapter on Drawing because it is a perfect example of what I mean when I refer to drawing in the context of painting.

If you look at this sketch closely you will notice that the shapes of color constituting Paul's face and shirt are very distinct. They were so much so, I could actually draw an outline around many of them. In a way, they are like a mosaic of light on him.

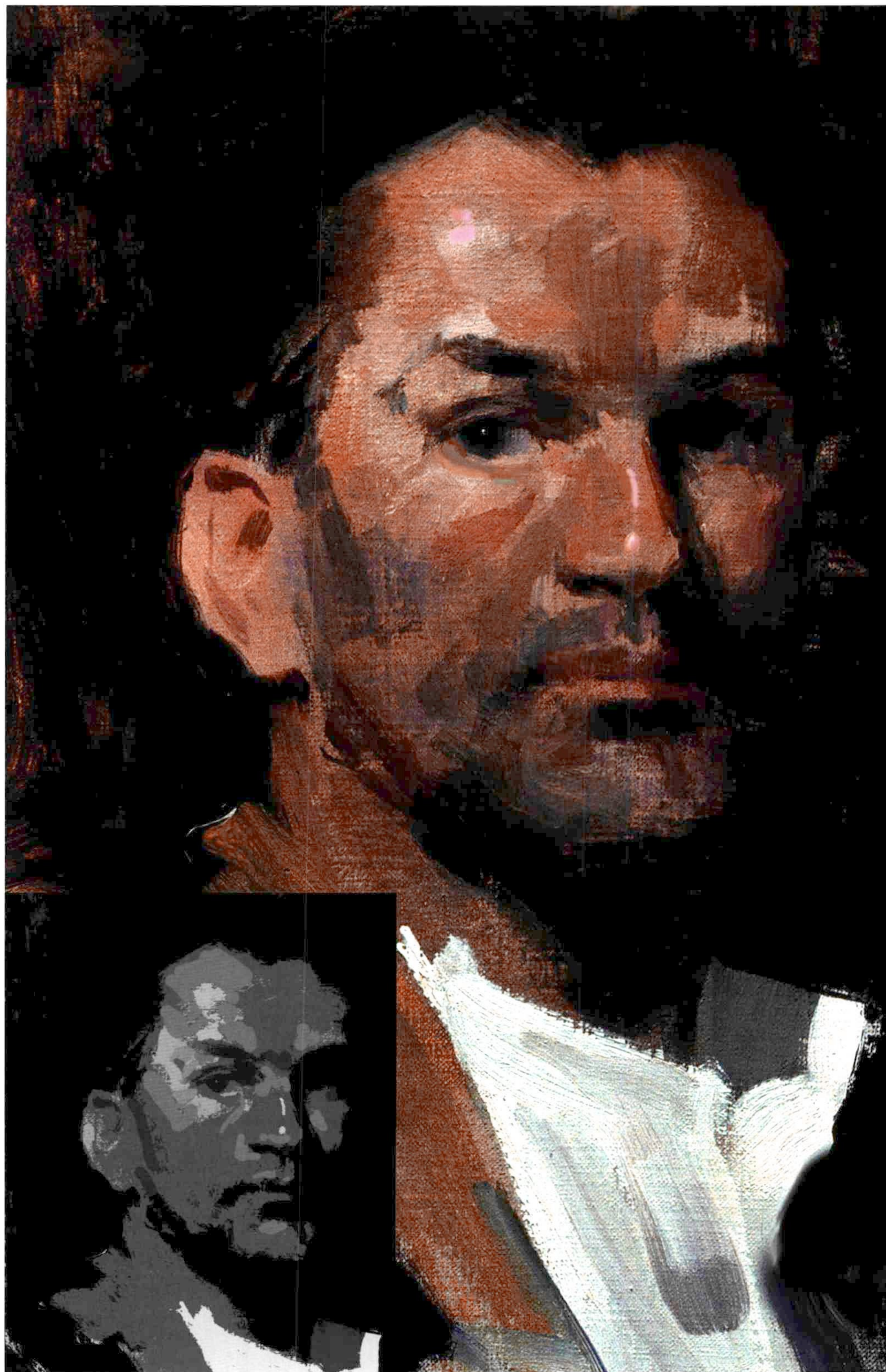
*By the way, **because** of the light reflecting from his form, the entire configuration you see here, all the big and little patches of colors that make Paul look like Paul, will be a whole new set of shapes if his head were turned even a small fraction in any direction. (But together they will still look like Paul.)*

*I counted about 115 shapes of color for his face and 15-18 brush strokes for the shirt and vest. Except for some softening of edges here and there, this could almost be one of those paint-by-number pictures, except it's not Elvis Presley, it's my pal Paul, **and** there are no numbers.*

Please note: In the small monochrome insert of Paul (opposite), only four main value shapes were necessary for a block-in: one single connected dark shape for his hair and the background, plus all the shadows of his facial features, part of his shirt, and his right eye.

The light side of his face, neck, and collar are pretty much one connected middle tone value shape (except for the one on his left cheek). One slightly dark value at his cheek bone, with a few mostly connected highlights, and that was it for my start. Of course the block-in was in color, but not more than five or six at most.

I have always found it fascinating how very little of what I see in my subject is actually necessary to put down in paint before a face appears on my canvas—how few colors, values, and details it takes before they blend, and I suddenly have a person on my canvas looking back at me!



CHAPTER FOUR—DRAWING FROM LIFE

A GENTLE REMINDER

Please dear friend, bear in mind as we begin this look at the subject of drawing that my point of view throughout this book is largely centered on painting from *life*. Working from a photo is fundamentally different. Why? Because one of the many challenges in working from life is the transformation of a *three* dimensional image into *two* dimensions, which has, in a limited way, already been done for us in a photo. Unfortunately that same convenience carries with it the intrinsic limitations of photography (compared to the measureless range of human vision). In any case, whether you work from life or otherwise, you must be sharp and never drift into thinking drawing is a casual skill. Of course if you trace your pictures from a projected image, only some of what I have to offer here or elsewhere in this book will be of any relevance.

GENES DON'T HELP

There is a popular notion that artists *are* artists because they are somehow born with a unique ability to draw. As we who draw as part of our life's work know, that is *not* true, but the *impulse* to draw *is* definitely within each of us in childhood. All kids from all cultures make scribbles and eventually images of a sort, but no soul arrives in this world endowed with the necessary skills to convincingly depict visual reality with a pencil or brush. I have never known of a painter who could do it without some structured training. That doesn't necessarily mean art school, because there are a few other ways these skills can be acquired. For example, if you were lucky as a youngster, and you had an obvious love of drawing, you might have had parents or teachers (as I did) who gave support or even early lessons. The Atelier system (studio apprentice) is another example. Every artist I have asked about their own early start in art tells more or less the same story of loving to make pictures and getting encouragement and help in doing it. Even the self-taught probably have a well-stocked library of how-to-do-it drawing books.

DRAWING IN THE CONTEXT OF PAINTING (Please read this carefully.)

For most of us, the word "drawing" brings to mind an *outline* of something. This deeply ingrained assumption originates in childhood when we learned to use lines to make pictures. Yet *in real life there are no lines around things*. As beautiful as many line drawings are, they are only *linear diagrams* of what we see. Painting, on the other hand, the kind I am dealing with here, attempts to create a two dimensional *depiction* or visual replica of my world by using all of the visible treats of Mother Nature—her limitless colors, her range of brightness and darkness, and her ever-changing tapestry of multicolored forms.

So, throughout this book when I use the word "*drawing*," I mean the size, shape, and arrangement of all the patches of color which collectively make things look the way they do (and which also constitute a painting). When I render those patches the right size, the right shape, and fit them together with their distinctive edges and colors, my painting *will* look like my subject. If I fail to do that, it will *not*. It will look different.

WHY DRAWING IS SO IMPORTANT

Sound drawing is the skill which allows all of the other visual elements to come together and form a true-to-life image. Why? Because colors, values, and edges are meaningless shapes by themselves. They are like the letters of the alphabet or individual musical notes in a scale—mere sounds or little black marks on a page until they are rationally arranged and joined just so. Only then do they make sense and thus facilitate instant recognition and convey meaning. Skillful drawing is just like that. It is the ability to see those shapes (notes and letters) in a landscape or a child's face and replicate them as a painting.

WHAT IT TAKES

Although drawing from life is a skill that must be learned, it isn't like learning to swim or ride a bicycle. Once you get the knack of it, you can't just relax and let it happen all by itself. It takes constant practice and the resolute dedication of a bird dog. Why? Because it is *not* a physical skill, or simply a body of information like English grammar or arithmetic. Drawing is a *mental discipline*—a state of mind requiring heightened perception, observational skill, and analytic ability. You might say it is perpetual learning, because it deals with continual variables rather than the repetition of memorized data or images. I always have the fond hope that someday it will get easier, but it never does. Sound drawing always demands great care right down to the last dab in my painting.

Interestingly, children under ten years or so are not the least concerned when their art doesn't look the way things do to grown-ups. This is because when little kids draw they are not trying to replicate nature (they couldn't anyway). They are simply telling a story. Adult drawing should not be forced upon them at an early age, because certain motor skills and mental developments should be allowed to happen at each child's individual pace first.

I LIKE LINES TOO

I do not mean to dismiss line drawing as being in any way inferior to painting. By itself it is a separate and beautiful art form with endless expressive power. My point is this: from here on I use the word drawing to mean the character, the dimensions, and the relationships of elements in a direct painting from life, not necessarily to the art of linear representation. All forms of art have their strengths and limitations. One is not better than another, but each does certain things better than another.

Having said all of the above, I must hasten to say line drawings are universally used (and often indispensable) in various early and middle stages of paintings as temporary guides in all media. Please refer back to pages 69 and 73 for examples.

WHY DOES DRAWING SEEM HARD?

It shouldn't. After all, at its core most drawing is simply *measuring and seeing the relationships among shapes*. As it applies to direct painting from life, it comes down to little more than figuring out the width and height of color shapes and then fitting them together one at a time (assuming you have already determined what shape is to be measured). Still, certain things about drawing remain very difficult for nearly everyone.

I find it odd when I think about it because drawing is the only aspect of the images we work with which deals with a measurable and definable aspect of the visible world. The other three elements: colors, value, and edges, are *relative* qualities with generous room for interpretation. By contrast, drawing is about *specific* dimensions. If a nose or other feature in your painting is "out of drawing," it is either:

1. TOO BIG.
2. TOO SMALL.
3. THE WRONG SHAPE.
4. IT DOESN'T FIT CORRECTLY WITH THE OTHER FEATURES.

All of the above are measurable qualities which can be verified with a ruler or calipers. Therefore, you would think good drawing could be nailed down exactly, or it is almost mathematical, but as we all know it doesn't quite work out that way. Theoretically at least, all things visible in this universe, including many invisible things (empty space, for example) can be measured with precision when they are reduced to two dimensions on a flat canvas. Well, not quite everything. Fog and mist, blazing fires, flying birds, explosions, squirmy little children, rain, crashing waves, and other such things *are* a bit hard to pin down. On the other hand, houses, mountains, grown-up people who sit still, and potted plants, all have very definite sizes and shapes which present us with measurable dimensions—*but even then we still miss the mark!*

GIRL IN A WHITE DRESS

oil on canvas, 16 x 12, 1971

Careful drawing need not result in "tight" or excessively detailed work. On the contrary. As this little painting shows, drawing well gives me the freedom to play with interesting brushwork as much as I please. Control through fine drawing is the key.

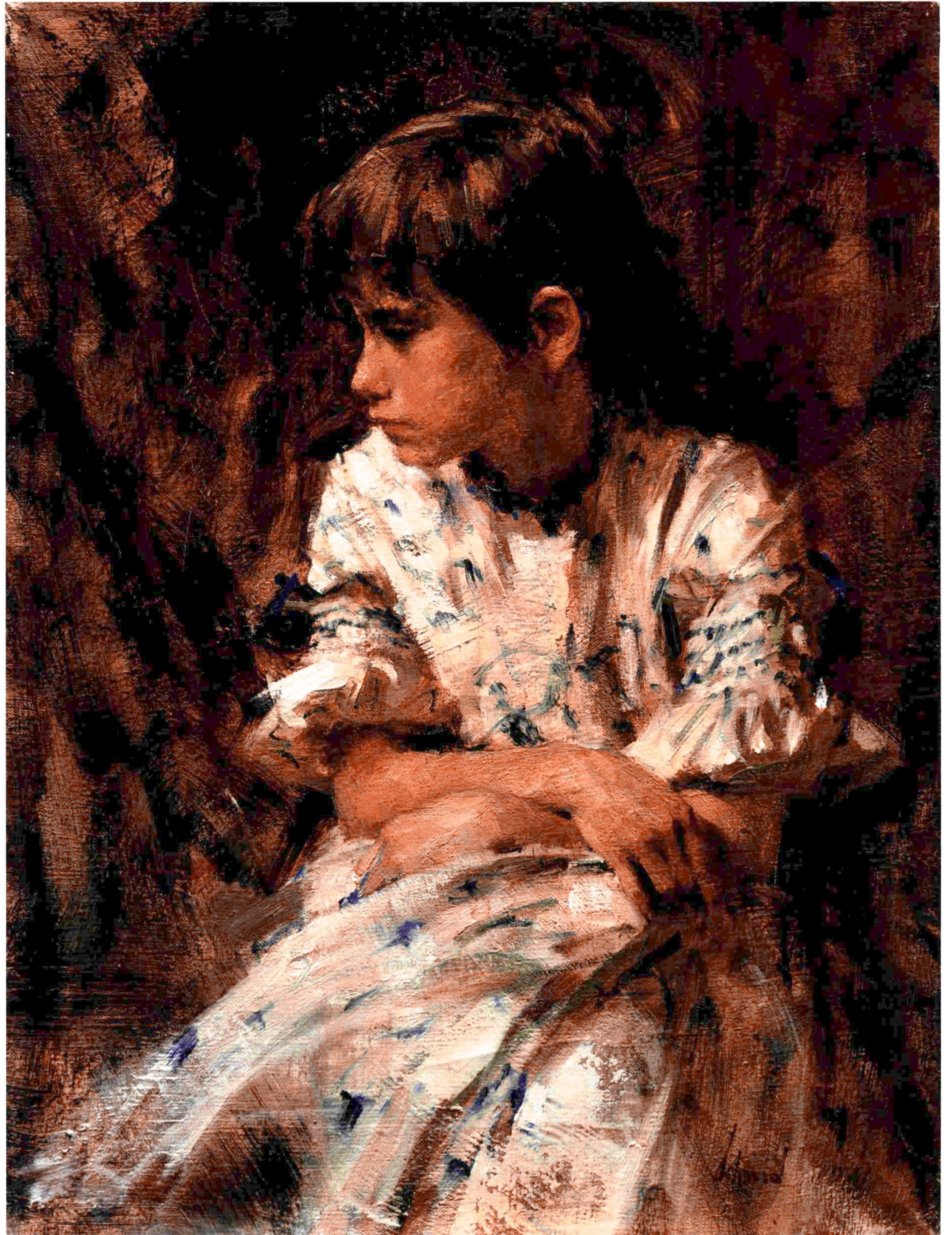
"Looseness," as I am very fond of pointing out, should be the way a painting LOOKS, not how it is accomplished.

Many of the loosely painted bravura works from the great period of painting in the 19th century were done with slow and deliberate brushstrokes.

Masters such as Elizabeth Sparhawk-Jones (before her illness), John Singer Sargent, Cecilia Beaux, Anders Zorn, Joaquín Sorolla, William Merritt Chase, Robert Henri, and the man called "the Master of Swish," Giovanni Boldini, and others, were professionals who planned and thought carefully before touching a canvas with paint.

Unlike super-tight realism, which tends to downplay a painterly look, the dashing style of bravura painting combines the resplendent qualities of paint itself with the experienced discipline of controlled application.

The American illustrator Haddon Sundblom, who mastered Zorn's free flowing style, would sometimes plan his brushstrokes for an illustration by drawing each one beforehand with a light blue pencil outline, like a paint-by-number picture. Sundblom was famous worldwide for his depictions of Santa Claus in Christmas ads for Coca-Cola. Practices like his were not unusual in the commercial art business, where a client paid for an artist's recognized style.



THE PROBLEM

If almost every shape can be measured, why is drawing so tricky? Why can some people see that their picture is "out of drawing," but cannot see where the mistakes are? Why are others not even aware their drawing is wrong—that it does not even remotely resemble their subject?

To begin with, I don't have to construct my face in the mirror each morning the way I do a portrait. My face is already there—complete and quite handsome too—and I simply *recognize* myself (backwards, no less). I do not have to scan myself analytically as I would a subject to be painted. In my usual early morning stupor I am not conscious of my specific facial relationships and dimensions—the things I must figure out from scratch when I do a portrait.

The very last thing on this earth I could possibly imagine doing before I've had my first cup of coffee in the morning, would be to measure my eyes and nose and ears! (It's hard enough just keeping my eyes *open*.) Later of course, I must make similar measurements as a routine part of my job as a painter. In a portrait, for example, it is the effort of determining those exact measurements and alignments that is often so taxing.

One reason it is sometimes hard for me to grasp those measurements, and then make them fit together just so, is that I must measure the *shapes* of color which make up my sitter's features rather than the *features* themselves. To make matters even more interesting, those shapes change with the light and angle of view. The same holds true for any subject. Landscapes and still lifes are just different arrays of large, small, and medium-sized colored forms. Most of them are abstract shapes. Sometimes though they will be geometric, resembling squares, rectangles, triangles, and so on.

Each time I begin a painting, I am dealing with a fresh set of configurations to untangle. As if all of that were not enough, many of the shapes I see are so hazy, figuring out where each stops and another begins (how they blend) can often seem impossible. (My childhood coloring books seemed so much easier.)

It isn't impossible though. The way in which shapes join together to form a realistic image is a fascinating subject, and it can be mastered like anything else. It is called the study of EDGES, and I discuss them at considerable length in Chapter Six. Try the following if you want to see nature create and blend forms. Go out late on a hot summer afternoon to a meadow, or a park if you live in the city, with a blanket or reclining folding chair, and watch the clouds. Try to pick a day when billowy cumulonimbus (storm) clouds are forming and notice how shapes appear and then change and blend into one another to make larger sweeping forms. Such clouds are not only lessons in abstract shapes, they also demonstrate the full range and interaction of edges.

THE EARLY ROOTS OF HOW WE LEARN TO SEE

Very little in our early learning and development prepares us for the task of critical observation as we paint. Knowledge is wonderful, but the *way* in which we are taught can make the job of painting a bit more taxing because of what we must unlearn. Whether we are self-taught or receive formal instruction, the most common direction of teaching is from the parts to the whole, rather than a holistic way from the onset. We learn about basic forms such as cubes, cylinders, cones, spheres, human form, foregrounds, backgrounds, perspective, and so on. As useful as those things are, all such studies are simply ways to sort out the visual world into easily understood parts. It isn't until we get into serious painting that we are forced to finally deal with the more sophisticated challenge of depicting the fully intact *whole* of what we see before us.

I hasten to say, the blizzard of information we take in as children (the socialization process) is all very necessary if we are to survive and function in society. Perhaps the parts-to-the-whole teaching is a necessary step for a young mind. In infancy we rely heavily upon our sense of touch and sight to explain the world around us. At the same time we acquire language and are taught the *names* of the many thousands of things we must know about. Thus begins the process of *categorizing* our curious new world instead of understanding it as an all-embracing totality.



GARDEN IN WALES watercolor on paper, actual size, 1994

At a certain point in middle childhood, when we begin to draw recognizable things, we further *separate* them from "empty" space and delineate them as outlines. Later, in art school, this preoccupation with form expressed as an outline is further reinforced as we learn to model the outline drawing with shading—further isolating objects in space and disregarding any relationship to their surroundings.

It is analogous to taking apart my computer to understand how it works—a sensible idea for learning what is inside—but when the bits and pieces are spread about, they do not look like the computer because they have ceased to be a singular functioning device. It is only after I have examined the parts, then reassembled them and turned it on, that I can understand the *wholeness* of the machine.

Our task then when we paint is to restore the original complex web that was so carefully taken apart. To do that convincingly we must deal with the *actual* information reaching our retinas—and that is what drawing *is*, as it applies to painting.

THE VISUAL FIELD AS PAINT

What we are literally seeing when our eyes are open (and there is light), is a two-dimensional panorama of the world immediately before us, plus a bit of peripheral vision. Two slightly different inverted images spaced about two and one half inches apart (yes, I measured it) are received by our retinas. Those images zoom through our optic nerves to our brain and are processed there, giving us a three-dimensional-right-side-up version of the world—and we do it all at nearly the speed of light. What a trick! Learning to draw seems like child's play by comparison (but it isn't).

Normally, as we gaze out across a scene we automatically separate objects in our field of vision from the space around them; then we organize the whole scene in terms of what things are—their sizes, shapes, local colors, and distances. The sky is big and empty, the barn is nearer and red and not so big, the cows are tiny and far away and have black spots, and so on. This is how we are able to make sense of the blizzard of light fragments striking our eyes. We recognize and identify patterns we are familiar with, and we give them names and colors and shapes. Then we put all of them together and call it a farm under a summer sky. Seeing the world this way is a marvelous thing indeed, a triumph of evolution, vital to our survival, and great to have when driving on the Los Angeles freeways, but a bit of a hindrance in painting from life.

When we paint, we must transform our three-dimensional experience into two dimensions so we can put it on our two-dimensional canvas. This means we must view what we are seeing as an arrangement of shapes on a vertical plane, not an assortment of items separated from one another in space. It is embarrassingly similar, at least in principle, to what we see in jigsaw puzzles, outdoor billboard painting, and paint-by-number kits. (There is indeed a tiny grain of truth in the weary old joke: *The secret of a successful painting is covering up all the numbers*).

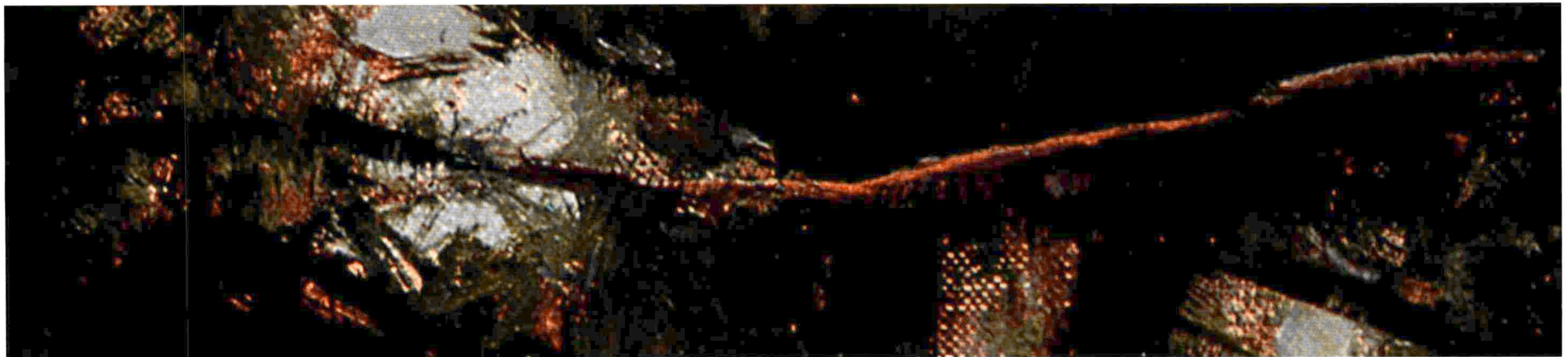
To get serious again, let me show you an example on the opposite page. The sky in my landscape painting does not *continue* behind the trees as it does in real life. The "sky" in this case is simply a color shape which stops at the edges of other color shapes (the tree branches), then reappears as a similar color shape at the opposite edge of the paint shapes of the branches. The enlarged images, Detail B and Detail C, show this clearly.

It may sound simplistic to mention something so obvious, but in practice it is not so easy to summon up enough cool objectivity to see something as evocative as the sweetly poignant look in a child's eyes as merely an assembly of flat patches of color. It goes contrary to the emotional logic of our experience. Moreover, it is not easy to identify shapes when they have indistinct edges and blend often imperceptibly into adjacent shapes. Nevertheless, this is what must be done, because painting the innocence in a child's expression is *impossible*, but painting the pattern of color shapes which constitute her expression *is* definitely possible.

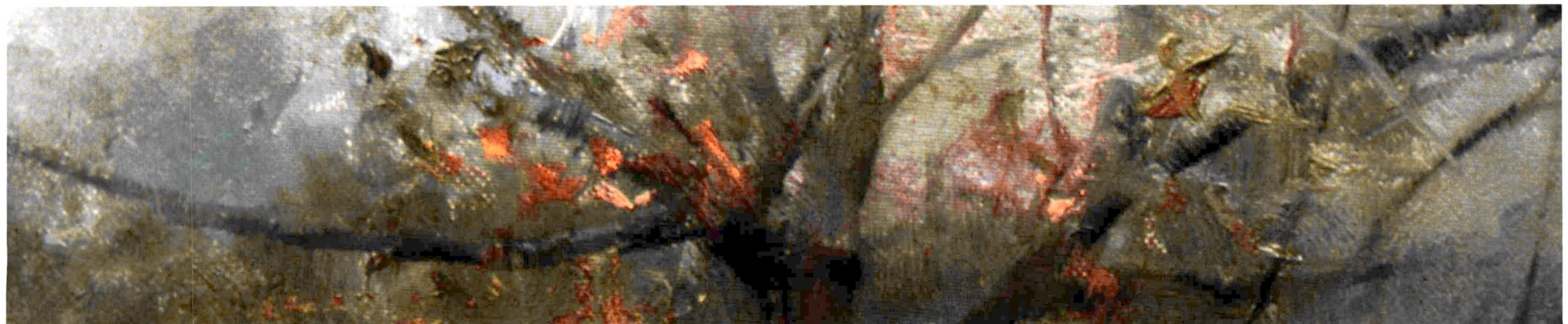
IT'S ALL JUST PAINT!



BRATTLEBORO BARNYARD oil on canvas, 24 x 36, Detail A



Detail B



Detail C



BANDEAU oil on canvas, 24 x 18, 1989

I find men easier to paint compared to women and children, especially men who have beards, rugged features, and angularity of facial bone structure. Such things are not only easy to grasp (and therefore easy to get right), but they also lend themselves to bold brushstrokes, which are always nice.

The other thing about beards and hats is that they hide some of the hard parts. In painting a head, for example, I have always found the line of the jaw, the mouth, and the chin to be the most demanding anatomical features. Eyes, noses, and ears are no problem for me because they have so many easy-to-see shapes. Also, there is no movement in the nose or ears, and not much in the eyes themselves. Eyes merely open or close, or look left or right, up or down. It is the eyebrows that have greater mobility and signal expression.

Contrary to popular belief, it is the mouth, not the eyes, that conveys the majority of facial expression, which is why the slightest error in painting a mouth can cause my result to look ridiculous.

The jaw and chin are tricky because their forms are so subtle and smooth. Also the jaw can change dramatically with age or weight gain. A beard and mustache or both can neatly veil all of these sensitive areas.

Another great benefit of a bewhiskered face is that it provides tempting opportunities for interesting edges.

Note also in this head study that there are two distinct light sources—a warm one on the model's left, and a cool one on his right.

This picture remains in my personal collection because I have always regarded it as one of the most rewarding portraits I have ever done. It was a three hour study painted at the Palette & Chisel Academy in the 1980s.

It is hard for me to imagine any other choice but to paint those color fragments and just let go of what I know about what they are. The only question I need to address as I paint is how to see the shapes before me as accurately as I can, and then fit them together properly. It took lots of practice under Bill Mosby's patient guidance, but now I see them. Most of the time I am able to paint the shapes correctly because I have disciplined myself to do them *one at a time* very carefully. Nearly seventy years of experience helps too.

MEASURING AND COMPARING TO GET IT RIGHT

After my block-in is complete and I'm ready for the meticulous no-nonsense phase of my creation, I take a deep breath and look carefully at the place on my subject I have decided to deal with first. I make the determination by asking myself what I wish to capture above all else. In other words I ask what is it I want to see happen first on my canvas so I know I'm on the right track. Only then can I ease back a bit and start to enjoy the process. The answer of course is easy because I decided what it would be the first moment I decided to paint my subject.

Zeroing in then on my target, I carefully measure the first thing I put down on my canvas, and then measure it again to make sure it is precisely correct, because it is *the* building block of all else to come. Then I measure the next shape and compare it to the first one. Next comes the third shape and I check it against the first two. The fourth is then placed and measured against the first three. I keep doing that over and over and over until I have the cow under the summer sky or whatever. It's a bit like laying bricks, except each "brick" (brushstroke) is unique, and instead of just ending up with a wall, I could end up with a great world-shaking, fabulously valuable, masterpiece of art!

For me this way of working is very important, because as the brushwork progresses, so does a reassuring and very necessary momentum of confidence. I know it may seem rather tedious, and it certainly doesn't have the flair of the usual swashbuckling sketching associated with starting a painting, but what it lacks in swagger it makes up for in superb control. It does away with most of the usual laborious correcting and repainting, and *that* appeals to me. I think it is a waste of valuable painting time to spend rectifying what could have been done right in the first place.

Q. How do I get my first shape right?

A. I choose one that is easy to identify so I can't miss.

Q. Which shapes are easy to see?

A. The obvious ones.

Q. Which ones are obvious?

A. Shapes having a clear geometry.

By clear geometry I mean squares, circles, ovals, rectangles, triangles, anything with straight lines and clean edges, etc. I try to use shapes which also have strong values and/or colors. (It's the reason why they are obvious.) Usually I go first for a shape that is well defined, something pure white or black, or a highly saturated primary or secondary color. *Those* qualities are easy to see, which means my chances for getting them right are pretty good.

In the past I have tried many things to get my judgments right. In my student days I would sometimes go up to the model with a ruler (if there is no other way) and physically measure the shape I needed. Of course it only worked when I was painting life-size, and even then was not very reliable. Why? Because very few things in a subject can be measured and still correspond to what I see from where I stand when I'm painting. The models did not like it either, especially the figure models. Today, several more or less geometrical methods of drawing resurrected from the Italian Renaissance and other periods are being taught. Some are quite interesting, but none meet the full requirements of painting from life in one session (*Alla Prima*). In the end nothing beats having a well trained eye and mind.

THE REFERENCE POINT

The "trick" in measuring shapes and intervals is to select a typical shape, feature, or object in or on a subject as a unit of measure rather than relying *entirely* on memorized average proportions (although such things should be learned as well, as they can be very useful), or using inches or metrics. I find it much easier to select a single feature in my subject and paint it the size I want it to be (let's call it my reference point), and then measure everything else according to it.

In doing a head, for example, I use the width of an eye, or the distance between corners of the mouth, or the width of the nose, as units of measure—in a full face pose, a sitter's proportions might be five eyes wide at the cheekbones, and seven eyes high from chin to hairline, and so on. In figure painting it is universal to describe a model as so many heads high, rather than sixty-six inches high. Horses are commonly described as so many hands high (human hands, that is, horses have no hands). My driver's license says I'm six foot one inch tall, but in a painting I would be about eight heads high. Although Nancy is much shorter than I, she is almost seven and a half heads high because her head is smaller than mine. Everything follows proportionally from the item I choose as my unit of measurement for the particular painting I am working on. In painting people, life size is the easiest because it is the size of the face you are most familiar with, the one you see in your mirror each day.

Smaller features, whether it's trees or structures in a landscape or bellybuttons on tummies, all have clear points of beginning and end, which make them easy to estimate and use for measuring. Because they are also *short* increments, you are more likely to get them correct than if you use a longer unit of measurement. It is always easier to judge the distance between someone's eyes than between their ears. Try it in a mirror and you'll see what I mean.

CAUTION: CURVES

The outlines of contours present problems for many artists, particularly in figure or portrait painting. Here are some things to think about: Most curves are rarely as "curvy" as they first appear. Inexperienced artists usually exaggerate them. For example, an overly rounded cheekbone is one of the most common drawing mistakes in painting a head or indicating anatomy on a figure. Another frequent error is drawing the skull or outline of the head as a single unbroken curve (it isn't). The way to get around curves (pardon the pun) is to think of every curve as a series of straight lines which simply change direction. If you paint them with that in mind, they will be stronger, more interesting, and far more accurate than a single nondescript curve.

Finding the key drawing points in a subject and then fitting the pieces together is not particularly difficult, but it does call for patience and discipline. It's like laying bricks plumb and level—very repetitious, but very demanding of concentration. Using the front view of a head again as an example: An imaginary line drawn straight down from the inside corner of the eye will usually just touch the wing of the nostril. A similar line dropped down from the center of the eye could locate the corner of the mouth. Using my measuring units then (the width of an eye, shall we say), I only have to judge the distance down those lines to place the nose and mouth in correct relationship to the eyes. Likewise, imaginary horizontal lines drawn from the nose and eye corners will tell me exactly where the ears are.

Unfortunately, problems do arise when a model moves. Live human beings enjoy breathing; they also like to blink, yawn, talk, stretch, shift position, and everything else when they pose. I can't sit still for more than a few minutes, so I'm amazed and grateful when others are willing to endure modeling. Most people are able to hold a pose well enough for my style of working because I always *expect* them to move somewhat. Even professional models are subject to the natural involuntary muscle adjustments a human body makes after long periods of holding one position. I am also very nice to my subjects. I like them bright, alert, comfortable, relaxed, and interested in what is happening. I think it is unnatural to stay in a fixed position, so I encourage my models to take breaks or move whenever they wish. I pose them so they will feel natural—my only requirement is they be able to return to their position if they drift off or take a break.



NUDE oil on panel, 14 x 18, 1989

To accommodate their inevitable movement, I rely upon *very thinly drawn* contour and center lines placed during my block-in to guide me (like the latitude and longitude lines on a globe). You are probably familiar with drawing books with pictures of the head as an egg with a line down the front and back (dividing an imagined face in two lengthwise). Another line is drawn down and around the sides for the ears, and then several horizontal lines circumscribing the egg at the level of eyebrows, eyes, bottom of the nose, and center of the lips. I find contour lines such as those useful, and once I place them I do not change them until I complete the head, and the lines are covered with finished painting. However, before I reach that point, they remain as a constant guide and as a *reference* when I bring a subject back into correct position. You can see how important it is then to have the first thing right, and how *it*, in turn, generates other correct elements.

IT ISN'T ALL DRUDGERY

I realize what I have just described sounds more like high school geometry than the sensitive act of creation, but I don't see any way around it. I *must* measure things because drawing has always been very hard for me. I do not have a special gift that allows me to do it naturally. Of course, measuring for competent drawing in itself isn't *Art* any more than scales and chords alone are Music. However, like those things, sound drawing for me is a technical requisite which must be present before my kind of Art can happen. Besides, there is no reason why a brushstroke can't be done with giddy passion and still be the right length and color! I love throwing paint around as much as anyone, and the last thing I want to do is take the fun out of painting.

The good news is, measuring by itself, even measuring the vague fuzzy shapes, gets easier with *practice*. The hard part is *getting into the habit of doing it* for *every* shape you paint. That takes real effort, but once you acquire it, you will experience a remarkable release, a sense of both freedom and control, the stuff of real power. Nothing will seem impossible when you realize you can draw well—all you have to do is get into the swing of measuring very carefully all the time. It is a state of high awareness, and it will let your brush dance in the same way virtuoso bowing technique makes a violin sing.

You can make it easier if you keep doing the simple, obvious things first. In this way you are likely to get them right, and they will help you to make the proper judgments about the more elusive shapes and colors. Resist the urge to do the hard parts first. (Those blurry grays and ambiguous shapes with lost edges.) For a while there back in my intense youth, I had it all backwards! I thought exactly the opposite—that I should get the hard stuff out of the way so I could relax and enjoy the easy things. Sounds familiar doesn't it? (Rather like dessert after the main course—a little reward after the serious nourishing part.)

It took a few years of experience away from school, on my own out in the real world, before it dawned on me to use the *easy* things to get the hard things—to use what is *easily known* to find what is *unknown*—the same beautiful idea that works so well in logic and mathematics. This idea should work for you too. Select something easy to see in your subject—a straight line, a bright color, any large value mass, something you can't miss—and paint it first! You are bound to get those things right, and you will be on track immediately. Painting from one correct thing to another gives you a powerful control over the process.

With correct things on your canvas, mistakes show up clearly because they stick out conspicuously amid the accurate work. You can easily see then where to make corrections, and the "right" stuff already in your picture will tell you how to fix them. Without correct work on your canvas, you can never determine if what you are putting down is right or wrong because there is nothing accurately painted to compare it to. The momentum of this kind of painting is a remarkable experience, and it is within the reach of anyone with the patience to always be very, very careful, and measure everything twice.



ZORRO oil on canvas, 20 x 30, 2008

Zorro began as a series of idle pencil sketches from life. He is an old cat now, set in his ways and pretty much focused on his meals and general comfort. He has no religion, politics, hobbies, money, opinions, or philosophy of life. He used to like the usual cat stuff such as stalking birds and squirrels, but aside from an occasional elderly or lame mouse, his lack of successes has drained his interest.

Ninety percent of this painting was done as a transparent rendering as described on page 88 of the painting MAVOURNEEN. Zorro himself and the cushions behind him are almost the only completely opaque parts of the work. The transparent areas owe much of their authentic fabric look to the fact that I was able to bring out the linen texture of my canvas by applying my colors darkly, and then rubbing away the excess paint.



GREENWICH VILLAGE oil on canvas, 12 x 24, 6th Ave. and 8th St., Manhattan, 2010

For this painting I was obviously **not** standing in the middle of the right-hand lane of 6th Avenue in Manhattan's Greenwich Village with taxi cabs and huge trucks missing me by inches as I calmly focused on the problems of perspective. In fact, I dashed gingerly and very quickly in between platoons of racing vehicles to snap a digital shot or two. Fortunately, I have set up many times to paint various locations in Greenwich Village from life so I was more than familiar with the characteristics of my favorite part of the city.

Here the main concern in drawing is the perspective aspect of the scene. As Nancy invariably points out to me, perspective may be pure geometry, but it can also be Art. She is right of course, especially in an area of the city as old as Manhattan. There are the usual perspective requisites here—the horizon line (at a level just above the roofs of the cars), and the main vanishing point for 6th Avenue (located in the most distant traffic lights, to the left of the black car). Along with these necessities, I made slight but deliberate deviations from the horizontal and vertical lines to give this sketch the authentic look of seasoned maturity I was aiming at.

If I had created and followed geometrically perfect perspective lines, the painting would have looked like any other boring architectural rendering. Smooth streets and straight sidewalks make for easy driving and walking, but it is the street bumps and patches, and cracks in sidewalks that make them interesting, and speak of the life of the city. I always like my painting to extend the viewer's gaze beyond what is on my canvas to that which is not, but which nevertheless is the overwhelming fact about any city—its people.

THE ELEMENTS OF DRAWING

So far, most of what I have been describing in this chapter has been about developing an ability to see the visible world in a certain way so it may be understood and painted convincingly. There are several other standard components of drawing I need to briefly mention here.

Usually referred to as *The Elements of Drawing (including Human Anatomy and figure drawing)*, they are ordinarily taught as fundamental subjects in traditional (serious) art school and in an increasing number of private classes. I can't explore the various elements in detail here because they are fairly deep studies in themselves, requiring more attention and space than I can provide in this volume. There are, however, some excellent books available which explore the subjects far better than I can here. I do make mention of some of my favorites in the paragraphs below. All of the books related to my comments in the following paragraphs are listed in the Recommend Reading section at the end of this book, and all are well-worn references in my personal library. I hope they will be part of yours too.

HUMAN FORM AND ANATOMY

As I pointed out in Chapter Two, experienced artists who paint the human figure know how valuable it is to understand what the curves and bumps on a model *are*, and how much such information helps in their work. From a practical standpoint, reliance on a good "eye" alone is clearly not enough when painting people, especially if they have trouble staying in position, or for some reason you have to make changes. A basic understanding of human anatomy and typical proportions is therefore crucial to both nude figure painting and when the subject is fully clothed.

In the latter case it is essential to know basic human form and proportions if your rendering of clothing is to be convincing. Along those same lines, it is also a very good idea to have an understanding of the *Laws of Folds* to make sure you are doing madam's expensive designer dress correctly. My constant companion in life class back in the late 1950s was my copy of the *Atlas of Human Anatomy for the Artist* by Stephen Rogers Peck. I mention it here because Peck's book, with his many superb interpretive drawings, plus the figure drawing sections in the *Famous Artists Course*, which I studied zealously as a teenager, formed the foundation of my understanding when I worked from a live model at the Academy.

PERSPECTIVE

I'll say it again: there is no good substitute for sound drawing when working from life. There are, however, items of knowledge which will complement your efforts the same way a basic knowledge of anatomy works with figure painting. For the artist who does landscapes, interiors, or still life with geometrically shaped objects, basic perspective is a must. There are two kinds of perspective: Linear perspective and Aerial perspective. Both deal with how things change appearance with distance and point of view. Linear perspective is about how they change shape. Aerial perspective explains the color and value changes caused by atmospheric conditions in a landscape as distance from a viewer increases (I deal with this in Chapter Seven on Color).

GENERAL ASPECTS OF DRAWING

There are other components in drawing which are just good common sense requisites: *Basic Forms (natural and man made)*, *Balance*, *Unity*, *Clarity*, *Simplification*, *Managing detail*, *Emphasis*, *the Design of empty space* (often called negative space), and *Anomalies and Oddities*. This last item will help you spot weird clouds shaped like Donald Duck, or posing a model so it looks like a tree branch is going into one of her ears and out the other. All of the items above are explored and explained in the chapters ahead. They are also covered in many of the books listed in the Recommended Reading section in this book.

PROPORTIONS

Knowing *proportions* is of course indispensable when painting or drawing *anything* other than life size. However, it is just as important when working at exactly life size. For example:

Do you know how big your hand is compared to your foot, or your face?

Do you know the midpoint on your body?

Did you know your elbows are on a line with your bellybutton?

How tall are you compared to your front door?

How high is your car compared to you?

How long is your little finger compared to your thumb?

I'm sure you get the point—it is knowing basic proportions and training yourself to see them in whatever you look at, is a great shortcut, not just in painting people, but with all else too. It means you don't have to figure everything out from scratch each time you set out to do a picture.

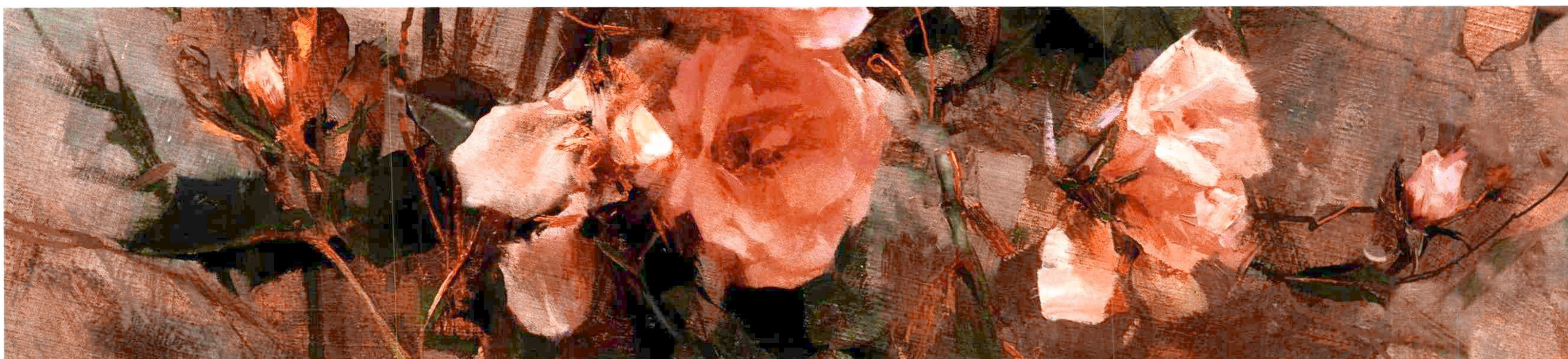
ALIGNMENT

This is the other big item to add to your skills. It is not a lot of do's and don'ts to memorize. Rather it is simply a discipline or habit which helps you to make very sure everything that needs to be lined up properly is indeed *lined up*. For example, let's say you're doing a portrait. The sitter is a pretty lady clutching a yappy Chihuahua. Both are facing you straight on. It just won't do to have her nose (the lady's) lined up one way, and her mouth and eyes in two other different ways. You must have, as they say, *all your ducks in a row* (or milady's nose). Fortunately, I can blame my age and poor eyesight when I mess up.

They say point of view is everything. Well, almost everything, and that includes the following nifty items: Two other requisites for me in checking for drawing accuracy are *stepping back* constantly to see my entire canvas and my subject together, and using a *mirror* to see everything in reverse. See page 144 for much more on the importance of these habits.

There is one ever true gem of advice regarding drawing I wish to close this chapter with. It is best expressed in the story of a young man of twenty-two years from Kansas who aspired to be a musician. One day he made a very big decision, and so with violin case in hand, traveled to New York to seek out the great teachers. Arriving in the Big Apple, however, he found himself hopelessly lost in midtown Manhattan. Fearless lad that he was, he approached an elderly man he reckoned was a real New Yorker and politely asked, "Sir, can you please tell me how to get to Carnegie Hall?"

—Without batting an eye, the old guy said, "*Practice son, practice!*"



SUMMING UP DRAWING

1. Drawing well has always been essential to humanity. Every material thing mankind makes, from underwear and socks, and cell phones, to the great Pyramids, and space stations, require pictures of those things before they can become real. Drawing is a lot like speaking or writing. Unless we are impaired, most of us can acquire language, but nothing we say will matter if we do not speak or write so others can understand.
2. Though the impulse to draw is natural and universal, the skill of drawing expertly is not a divine endowment or inherited. It must be learned, even if it means self-teaching. It helps a great deal if you love to draw.
3. When I use the word "**drawing**" in the context of painting, I mean the size, shape, and arrangement of all the patches of color which collectively make things look the way they do (and which also constitute a painting). When I render those patches the right size, the right shape, and fit them together with their distinctive edges and colors, my painting will look like my subject. If I fail to do that, it will look different.
4. Drawing is a **mental discipline**—a state of mind requiring heightened visual perception, observational skill, and analytic ability. (I know you have those for the things you enjoy.) You might say drawing is perpetual learning, because it deals with continual variables rather than a body of memorized data like law or medicine or chemistry.
5. No matter how good or experienced you get, you must practice drawing regularly to sustain and perfect it, the same way serious musicians must do.
6. When it comes to working from life, there is nothing theoretical about drawing. It really comes down to little more than figuring out the width and height of color shapes, and then fitting them together one at a time, but it's never quite the same from one time to the next.
7. How do I get my shapes right? I choose one which is easy to identify, one I can use as a yardstick, so to speak, to compare others to so I can't miss.
8. Which shapes are easy to identify? The obvious ones. Which ones are obvious? Shapes that have a clear geometry. By clear geometry I mean squares, rectangles, triangles, anything with straight lines or clean edges such as circles or ovals.
9. A "trick" in measuring shapes and intervals is to select a typical shape, feature, or object in or on a subject as a unit of measure. In doing a head, for example, I use the width of an eye, or the distance between corners of the mouth, or the width of the nose, as my units. A common unit is the head, for example, the average person is between 6½ and 7½ heads high.
10. Try not to exaggerate curves. Show them as a series of straight lines which change direction at points along the curve. It looks stronger that way.
11. Pick up some of the books on drawing listed in the Recommend Reading section. Learn basic anatomy and figure drawing. Get into a life class if you can. Study the simple principles of perspective; available in many books and on the Internet.
12. Study drawings and paintings of the Masters you really like, and figure out why you like them. Don't "like" a work just because some art expert with a degree says you should.
13. Step back as much as possible as you work so you can see your picture and subject together. You will then be able to make judgments about accuracy which can (and usually do) go unnoticed when working close to your painting.
14. Practice—Practice—Practice!





DEMONSTRATION SKETCH (Simplified value block-in, 25 minutes), oil on canvas, 11 x 10, 2012

CHAPTER FIVE—VALUES

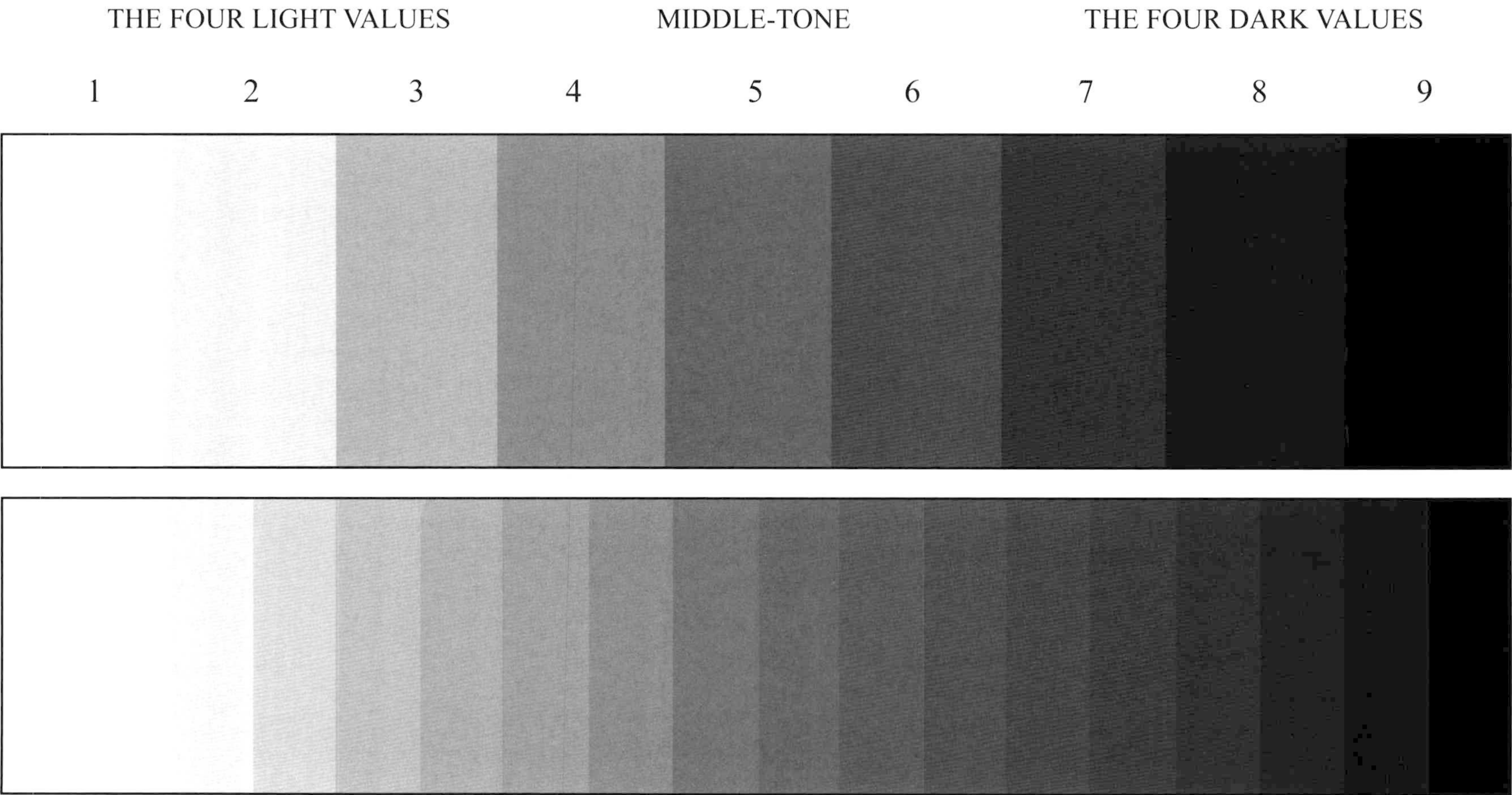
WHAT ARE VALUES?

The term *Values* refers to the range of lightness and darkness within a *subject*. It also refers to the light and dark tones from white to black in a *painting*. *Titanium White* pigment is as light as we can attain in a picture; *Ivory Black* or its equivalent mixture is the darkest.

I work with a traditional Flemish value scale for my paintings. It is a grouping of nine tones from pure white to black. The first four values are considered the **light values**. The last four are the **dark values**. The one in the middle is the **middle-tone**. (What else?) This division of the scale into nine increments is practical because more than that seems cumbersome, and less is not quite enough. Value scales for printers, decorators, and industrial use (such as the Munsell color system), use a much greater number of values, but the progressive value differences within them are so slight it usually requires technical aids to detect them. In any case, no matter how many slices are created, the range is still from white to black.

Please note: I use the words **tone or tones**, or sometimes **halftones** interchangeably with the word **values** throughout this text as in: *the values in the sky are lighter tones than the trees, but the leaves are halftones*. Also, I often refer to very light and very dark values as the light and dark **accents** (of any color) in a painting.

Below is my version of the traditional value scale in nine segments. I also include a scale with eighteen values because it is probably closer to the actual number of tones in an average full-value painting when blending of color shapes is taken into account.



THE TRADE-OFF

Compared to the many values in nature our nine aren't much, but they are all we have to work with, so we must use them thoughtfully. (I discuss the *Conservation of Values* in detail a little further along in this chapter.) Because we have only a few values to work with compared to the vast range of possible color mixtures, we must often settle for capturing the *effect* of light rather than drive ourselves bonkers trying to capture mother nature's actual blinding sunlight or stygian blackness.

My teacher straightened me out early on about values with jokes about how one day while Van Gogh was out landscape painting he got angry because he couldn't paint the sun as bright as it was. So he cut off his ear (yuck!) and then shot himself in the head out of sheer frustration. The tale wasn't exactly true, but it certainly got my attention. I like having both of my ears.

CONTRAST

Contrast is the difference in lightness and darkness among things. Without it we might as well be blind. Contrast is the main light condition which permits us to see. If there were no such thing as contrast, the world would be as invisible to us as a white rabbit in fresh snow. Whether it's writing your name or painting a picture, it is the *only way* I know of to depict anything on a two dimensional surface. The *degree of contrast* within a painting determines how *intense or faint* the portrayal of light will be. Other influences of light on visibility involve (to a lesser degree) *color family* and *light temperature*. See Chapter Seven on Color and Light.)

OUR SUN, THE SOURCE OF EVERYTHING (Including us.)

Prior to the 19th century we rarely see paintings even come close to depicting sunlight successfully. All of that ended in the early 1800s when painters left the subdued light of their studios in droves to work out of doors and seriously explore sunlight. Before the century ended, outdoor painting was firmly established not only with the Impressionists, but also among painters not usually identified with them. Joaquín Sorolla, for example, and a few others like him probably captured its effects better than anyone because they understood a key fact—that despite its often blinding brightness, and the usual light reflecting into them, *bright clear sunlight always produces shadows and warm dark accents of strong contrast*.

Not everyone appreciated this very important bit of information. For example, one of the main problems the French Impressionists faced in getting more vibrant colors was that pigments are simply less colorful as they get darker. One of their favorite solutions was to lighten the values of the dark areas in their paintings, particularly the shadows, to get better color. However, that was not always successful, because while it did enhance the colors, it *reduced* the natural contrast provided by the shadows, which is the *opposite* of what normally happens in strong sunlight. Nevertheless, many high-key Impressionistic paintings lacking strong shadows still look bright and sunny when seen in galleries or museums. This is due perhaps to their contrast with the dark paintings in the rest of the museum galleries. In fairness it must be remembered that the Impressionists were creating *impressions*, not literal renderings. What they achieved was to the world of art what going to the moon was for science and technology.

One more reason why the sun produces strong shadows is that its brightness causes the pupils of our eyes to contract, which reduces the *amount* of light reaching our retinas. *That* in turn causes us to see fewer values and colors in the mid-tones and the darker range in the shadows. This is why colors are most colorful and values more subtle in high quality light, the kind you see on a day of moderate overcast. Tempered light such as overcast allows our pupils to widen and let in more information. Therefore, contrary to popular belief, we see *fewer colors* in bright sunlight, and much *more* in softer cooler light.

In gradually dimming light, such as when light is slowly fading in the evening or on a late winter afternoon, our ability to see the differences between *dark values and colors diminishes* as the light gets weaker. This can be a fooler, because as the dark areas in our subject and on our painting slowly get harder to discern, we can still see the lighter colors and values fairly well, and so may not be aware that *all of the darks are starting to look the same*.



CAPTAIN JOHN'S HOUSE oil on canvas, 11 x 10, Putney, Vermont, 2007

DARKNESS

The *Chiaroscuro* painters of the late Italian Renaissance went the other way—**increasing** the contrast in their works. Many of the Dutch painters went even further in their portraits, often painting backgrounds and everything else but the sitter completely black. In much of their art, black constitutes the majority area. To be fair, black backgrounds were probably just fashionable in their time, and still today when a background actually *is* very dark it's not a bad way to represent empty space. However, when they are rendered as an unrelieved colorless black, I find them boring, and in my opinion a bit of a cop out, particularly when used habitually. There is also a problem with glare in viewing and lighting such canvases, plus a loss of the "emptiness" effect when dust and grime gets on the canvas surface. Some black pigments tend to crack a lot too. So dear friend, I'm not a big fan of vacant blackness. It reminds me too much of death. Besides, I can achieve blackness anytime just by closing my eyes.

The use of vacant darkness can also be a tempting way to obscure things which may be difficult to paint. Even Rembrandt was said to have remarked that his biggest challenge was painting emptiness. Indeed it was and still is, especially if the emptiness we are dealing with happens to be a shadow. We know today to achieve authentic color it is vital to understand the principles of **light temperature and color temperature**. Alas, a look at the paintings done in the 16th and 17th centuries shows the concept of light and color temperature was not yet very clear. I suspect more than a few great Masters had some awkward moments with the subtle colors within shadows, which may be why so many resorted to the device of blackness, perhaps as a way out.

Well, *we* undoubtedly have a lot to learn too. I think of us, of you and I, living in a time when many (not you and I) think of the Art world as a sort of free-for-all, where anyone of any level of mental stability, at the slightest whim and for any reason, can jump in and call himself an artist. We sometimes fail to remember how extremely important high skill, craftsmanship, and passionate dedication were to painters of earlier times. Those attributes were far more than just admirable qualities. Art was a noble vocation and a way of life. Their skills were assumed to be divinely infused. Being an artist was their very identity, their reason for existing.

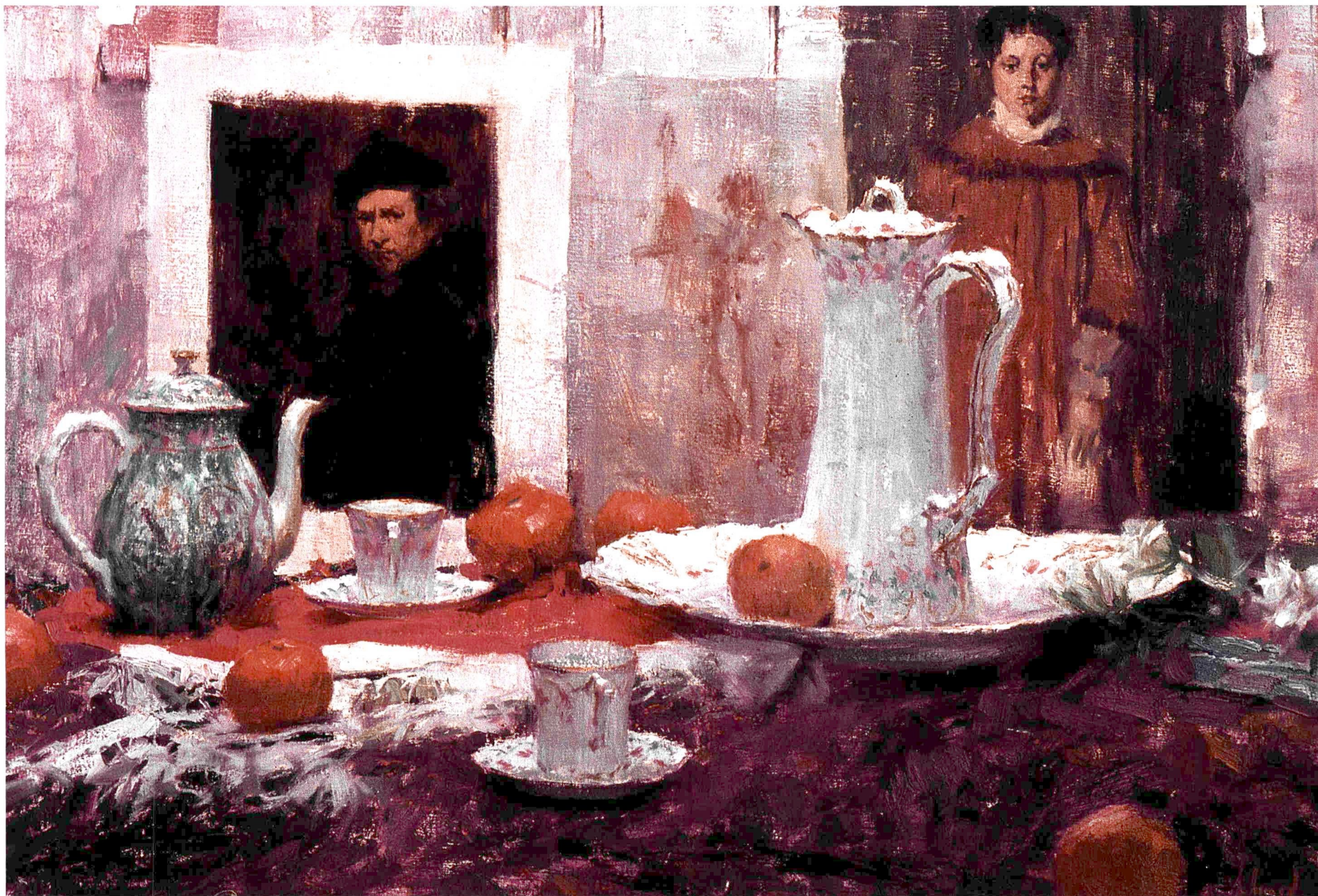
To say the least, they were doing their best. And because they painted with such amazing beauty and skill, who could dare to criticize them about things we are fortunate to know in our time, but were not known to them in their day. At any rate, blackness still remains a fashionable and popular haven today, even though the blackness we normally encounter in everyday life really **isn't black anyway**; it is just a lot of dark colors—**but colors nonetheless—and quite beautiful**. Therefore, when you see what looks like black in your subject, give it a little jolt. Paint it with mixtures of Alizarin Crimson, Ultramarine Blue, and Transparent Oxide Red (or other similar pigments). If you are too attached to your black, at least mix a dark red, or blue, or brown, or green, or purple, into it so it has a family identity. We all need a family.

DAZZLE

Even though we cannot paint with light the way nature does, nor the way television, computer monitors, and other electronic toys such as cell phones do, we can still achieve astonishing simulations of light and emotional atmosphere mood by the resourceful choice and formation of values. Nature's complex of lights and darks await us like instruments in a great orchestra. We are free to use them in any fashion we choose. The way to use them most effectively is to have a clear vision of what we seek in a painting.

Values can be manipulated in several interesting ways. One familiar example concerns the **value key** of a picture: by working within only a limited portion of the value scale in the overall majority area of a painting, various subtleties of atmosphere or emotion can be created. This is known as working in a value key. To illustrate: A picture which uses mostly the four lighter values of the value scale, is considered a **high-key painting**. One which uses mostly the four darker tones of the scale, is described as **low-keyed**.

Often the key can be delightfully interrupted somewhere in the painting with a value above or below a key as an attention getting device. A pure white or sudden bright color injected into a low-key painting is a familiar example, as is a dark accent in one or more places in a high-key work. One caution however—when you are creating a painting in a value key, have fun, but try not to go overboard with these little "eye-catchers." There is a very thin line between a perfect note of emphasis and vulgarity.



TANGERINES oil on canvas, 20 x 30, 1965

Some paintings are just plain fun to do. I began this one as an experiment in colored light by suspending a large sheet of purple cellophane above my set up. The illumination source was my big north window, so I had a well-balanced light coming through the cellophane. The result was this strong harmony, a bit theatrical I admit, but why not? My block-in began with a wash of Cobalt Violet to set the harmonic tone. The rest was like creating a shower of colors using the violet saturated tones of the Ultramarine Blue, Alizarin Crimson, Cobalt Blue, Cadmium Red, Terra Rosa, and Yellow Ochre color charts.

THIS IS WHAT WE KNOW SO FAR

Contrast, as we know, is what makes things visible. We also know we can't reproduce light itself with our limited reflective pigments. But we can separate light and dark values into nine neat little jumps, and that very dark areas can still be colorful.

BUT WHAT ABOUT THE ACTUAL BUSINESS OF PAINTING?

1. How do I make sense of the jumble of lights and shadows and other tones in my subject?
2. How can I see values in a simplified way in my subject?
3. How do I identify values and pick out the "right" ones to use?
4. How can I paint pictures strong and simple in value?

Questions one and two are really the same; the second more or less answers the first—I sort out the jumble of values in a subject by seeing them in less detail and in only a few essential values. Questions three and four bring into play two other essential concepts as well—*Comparison*, and *Conservation of Values*. I have a great deal to say about both of these items in this chapter, especially the purpose and use of COMPARISON because it is critical to every judgment and decision you will make as you work. CONSERVATION OF VALUES is an idea basic to achieving a strong look in your painting, especially its design.

Q. SO, HOW CAN VALUES BE SEEN IN A CLEAR AND UNCOMPLICATED WAY?

A. BY **STEPPING BACK** A FEW FEET FROM YOUR CANVAS, **SQUINTING DOWN** AT THEM, AND **COMPARING** THEM TO ONE ANOTHER!

THE RIGHT WAY TO SQUINT (I know this sounds funny.)

Learn this and you're home free! *And*, it costs nothing, because not only do you already have the instinct, you have also been using it your entire life. You do it every time the light is too bright, or when you're out zooming around the Riviera in your yellow Ferrari 458 convertible. Developing your squint reflex into a skill is probably *the most valuable tool you can have* in making sense of what often seems to be a bewildering jumble of details and values in a subject. Why? Because your most fundamental technical problem with painting in "getting it right" is to *simplify* and thus understand the *relationships* of values to one another in your subject. The most direct way to do it is to *partly* close your eyes when you look at your subject.

Try it now. Wherever you are, stop reading for a moment and glance around at your surroundings. Then start squinting down *very gradually* until superficial details disappear and only a few coherent shapes remain. That's all there is to it! Well, not quite all, there *is* lots more ahead, so please read on. What I have just described is the very easy physical part of it. I realize, of course, things just seem to get dark the first few times you try it, but with practice, you will glean valuable information. Color will tend to diminish as you close your eyes slightly, allowing you to sort out values easier. Best of all, you will be on your way to seeing in a more organized way.

THE TRICK IS KNOWING WHAT TO LOOK FOR WHEN YOU SQUINT.

To illustrate: hold this book at arm's length and look at this page. Then *slowly* close your eyes until the paragraphs form gray rectangles on the white paper—bravo! you have just simplified, and you can now paint a picture of this page without doing all the individual words and letters. When I first look at my subject, I squint down to determine: 1. Which values are the *lightest lights* (pure white). 2. Which are the *darkest darks* (black). 3. Which values make up the three *average light values* (numbers two, three, and four on the value scale). 4. And finally, which values make up the three *average dark values* (numbers six, seven, and eight on the value scale). The images on the opposite page and following pages show what I see and learn as I gradually squint down.

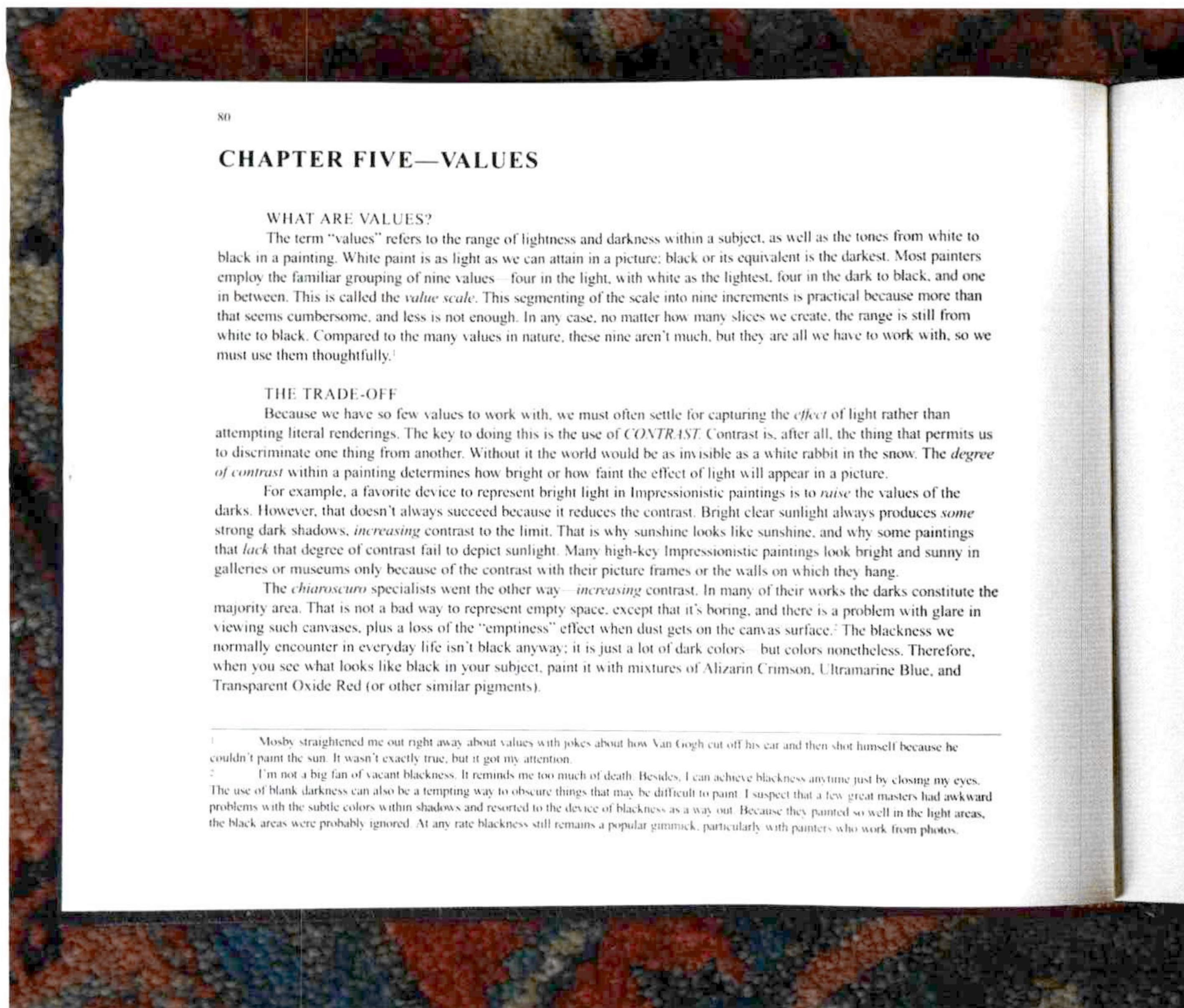


Figure 1. Normal view of page.

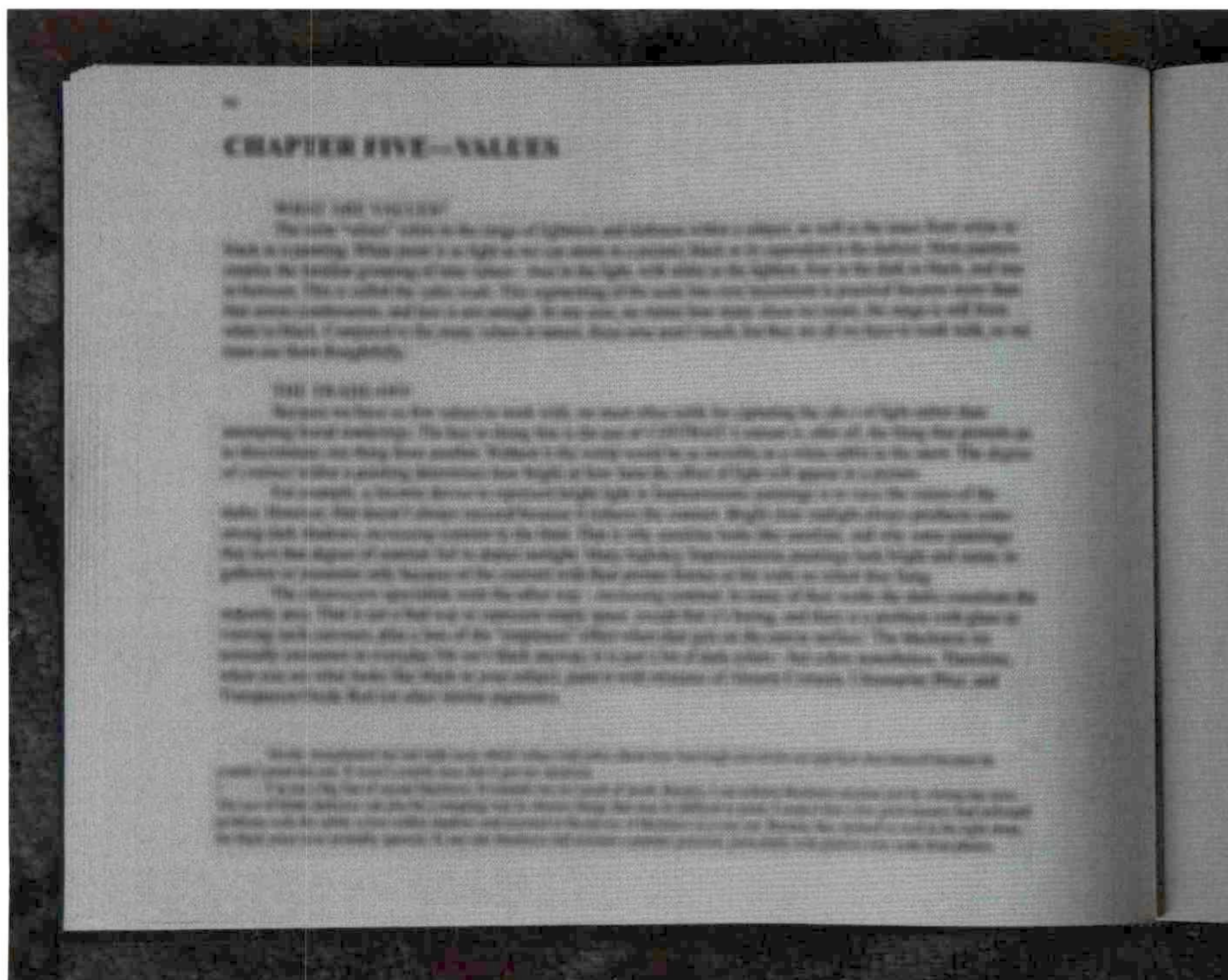


Figure 2. Squinted view of the same page.

Here are two views of a printed page (opposite). The top one, Figure 1, is a page from an early printing of *Alla Prima* seen normally with eyes wide open. Figure 2 below, shows the same page with eyes partly closed.

Ignore the fact that the overall view is darker. The color is mostly lost as well—but notice instead how simplified the image has become! The details of the text have merged to form more or less solid rectangles of medium gray. If that page was in one of your still life paintings or a picture of someone reading, you could show it very easily with just three values and a small number of brushstrokes.

Open your eyes normally to see your subject's true values and colors when you actually get down to painting them, but do so with the understanding of their relationships, and the simplicity you saw when you squinted.

There is a definite limit to how far down you can usefully squint before your image becomes something like what you might see if you were legally blind. It doesn't take a whole lot of trying to find that point. Physically, when you squint, your eyelashes come together to form a tiny diffusion screen. That is what does the trick. Any further closing down does not help. My experience has been that only a little closing of the eyes is necessary, perhaps as little as ten to thirty percent.

Onlookers watching you squint might think you are angry, or in pain, or have serious eye trouble, but pay no attention to them. Squinting works, and that is all that counts! Besides, it's better than having them watch you do a bad painting. Your dignity will also be restored as they watch a masterpiece happen before their very eyes!

Admittedly, trying to see through half-closed eyes might seem confusing at first, but please be patient, this is very important to you. Useful squinting is something that comes with practice, and useful practice means doing it properly. Properly means closing your eyes down far enough to reduce the subject to a few basic shapes—yet not so far that all form is lost. The idea is merely to make things simple, not make them disappear in a blur of fuzzy darks—so don't shut your eyes down too far. Please, please, practice until you really get it.

USING COMPARISON TO GET THE "RIGHT" VALUES

I have been describing squinting as a way of simplifying my subject, but how do I pick out the "right" values once I have squinted at things? Let me first give you my definition of "right values" in a *painting*—they are any set of darks and lights having the same relationship to one another as the values in my *subject*. If the values in my painting are the same as in the subject, then I'm on the money. I select the "right" values for a block-in by squinting down until details fade away and I can see not more than about five major values in my subject. ***Then I use only those five or so values for my block-in.*** In the subsequent stages of my painting I try not to subdivide those five values too much. If I can, I use appropriate color changes instead of more values as I add detail, refine, and complete my work.

Comparison allows me to do this, and I continue to constantly compare things throughout the entire process. Comparison is a vital tool for determining all elements in a painting—edges, values, color, and drawing. Accurate drawing is, after all, simply *comparing* the dimensions of a given shape to others in a subject, then asking myself if they are the same or different, and if so, what the difference is. You can see from this how very important comparison is when you are working larger or smaller than life size. When comparison is used along with squinting, it tells you when something doesn't belong, and when it does. While comparing is clearly important, it isn't particularly difficult. All of us use it in our daily routines to make judgments about everything from whether our socks are the same color, to which tomatoes we will buy. Naturally, a standard of some kind is always involved. I choose an obvious easy-to-see value in the subject as my standard of comparison. Often it will be a model's white collar or black hair or clothing. It is then relatively easy for me to judge the subtle skin tones (middle values) by comparing the degree of difference to the pure white or black. Extremely light or dark values or pure bright colors are always better to use for making comparisons than grayed values. One reason I love snowy landscapes, and why they are a snap to paint, is I have lots of lovely white stuff as a known standard for comparison.

STEPPING BACK

Comparing is most effective when you ***STEP BACK, SQUINT DOWN, and JUDGE (compare) your entire painting against the entire subject.*** Sargent (among many others) reportedly placed his canvas very close to his subject, making all of his decisions from a stepped-back position (about eight feet). He then returned to his canvas, applied his brushstrokes (without looking at the model), and stepped back again to check and see if they looked "right," which meant whether or not they matched what he saw in his subject. He is said to have stepped back relentlessly for virtually every group of brushstrokes in his paintings. It took exceptional discipline, but judging from his work, it was certainly worth it. When I had the rare privilege of visiting Sargent's London studio I looked at the carpet to see if it was worn from all his stepping back, but alas, the carpet had been replaced.

I highly recommend standing rather than sitting when painting from life or otherwise. That way the habit of stepping back every two or three minutes comes more easily. To this day I still remember my mentor, Bill Mosby, at the Academy, putting his hands on my shoulders to pull me backwards several feet to see mistakes in my painting which were not apparent up close. I stood to paint, and stepped back habitually from the time I was in art school until my middle age years, when a spine injury forced me to sit. Today I get up and walk back to view my canvas every ten minutes, but it's not quite the same. Seeing from a distance is good for many things in life besides painting, just make sure of what is behind you.

Another big help, whether I stand or sit, is the use of a mirror so I can see my work in reverse. I have a large plate glass mirror, about twenty inches square for studio use. (Avoid cheap mirrors from drugstores or discount outlets. They are usually distorted.) Mine is mounted on a tripod so I can place it a short distance behind me according to the size of my painting. Outside the studio I use a high quality hand held cosmetic mirror. Seeing a painting in reverse is amazing. I always spot one or more mistakes, invariably with proportions or alignment, often embarrassingly obvious errors I was quite blind to before I saw them in my mirror. Mirrors are also nice for checking to see if I have paint on my face.



SERENADE oil on panel, 12 x 16, 2010

Few paintings I have ever done were as simple in values as this. Earlier in the day he had posed for a portrait. Afterward as he was relaxing with his guitar, I asked him not to move for about twenty minutes. The result is the spontaneous quick sketch above.

ALL THE TINY STUFF

Imagine the countless details in a field of tall grass, a head of hair, falling snow, a lace dress, or the branches on a line of trees against the sky, and so on. My experience has taught me there are just too many color changes, value transitions, complex edges, and odd shapes in such things to attempt to render them literally. Before Direct Painting was widely practiced, many painters simply replicated intricate details. It was tedious work and in my view unnecessary. I prefer the more interesting solutions which capture the *visual effect* of detail rather than a literal rendering. Ingenious examples of superb painting of minutiae can be seen in Antonio Mancini's *Il Saltimbanco* (1879), and William Merritt Chase's painting, *A Friendly Call* (1895).

Occasionally a subject will be strong and uncomplicated, as it was when I did the sketch from life of *We Three* seen on the page opposite. It is exceptional when a subject does not require some reduction of its visual essentials, at least to the extent they can be depicted with a practical number of brushstrokes. Smart squinting at the subject allows me to do that, because it distills small details as well as color shapes close in value down to patterns I can more easily manage.

A NOTE ON EDGES

Besides the seeming infinity of detail nature presents to us, complication in a subject also requires the edges of color shapes be sorted out according to their relative hardness or softness. (See Edges, Chapter Six.) When one shape blends gradually into another it can be hard to pinpoint where one ends and the other begins. When transitions are that indefinite, they must be painted the way they appear. It is as simple as that. If you paint a fuzzy shape clearly and distinctly, it won't look like the shape on your subject. Resist the impulse to open your eyes to see more clearly when dealing with indistinct areas, because doing that defeats the purpose of squinting. You must rely on the simplified version of what you see when you squint down. If edges do remain strong when you squint, paint them the way you see them. If they are not, don't make them clear unless there is a good reason to clarify them, and the change doesn't significantly alter the way a subject as a whole looks.

ONE BIG NO-NO: DO *NOT* SQUINT AT YOUR PAINTING. IT'S POINTLESS.

OTHER SQUINTING DON'TS

It is important to be aware of what *not* to look for when squinting. Here are some things to keep in mind:

1. DO NOT SQUINT FOR COLOR! Colors darken when you do it, and you can't identify them properly. Open your eyes for color. (See Color, Chapter Seven.)

2. It is also not meant to be a way of seeing the true values in a subject. Obviously, the *actual* values will be lighter when you view your subject normally with open eyes (the darkest darks, however, will remain as they appear when you squint). Keep in mind the purpose of squinting is to make judgments about the *relationships* among and between values, not to paint the shades you see during squinting. In other words you squint down not to see how light or dark things really are, but rather which values are lightest, which are darkest, and which fall into the middle tones—compared to one another. Those are the important relationships.

3. Some common sense is needed. Many of the things we paint consist of complicated tangles of small irregular contrasting values which *should not* be interpreted as a single shape with only one predominant value. You cannot, after all, average out the black and white stripes on a zebra and paint him flat gray. It won't look like a zebra! In such cases, try to divide your subject into as *few* major value shapes as possible. And do so without ignoring those which are clearly important to describe your subject, even if they *are* small shapes. If the shapes are very tiny and numerous, view them from the greatest distance practicable, and use your experience and the good old common sense I mentioned above.



WE THREE oil on panel, 8 x 12, 1995

This small painting illustrates every point I made in the first paragraph on the page opposite, about simplifying complicated elements into plain value areas. The doll in the center had actual human hair, and I could see each one distinctly if I looked with my eyes wide open. With a bit of squinting her entire hairdo resolved into one value with one interesting shape and a variety of edges, and guess what, it looks exactly like hair! In the context of this painting I gave the same treatment to the way I rendered the doll's dresses and the blue-purple bow on the red headed doll.

What I enjoyed most of all in doing this painting was giving imaginative personalities to the trio above. Having raised three girls myself, I have abundant experience in dealing with multiple unique mentalities.

4. I sometimes have a tendency to simply forget to squint, and instead open my eyes wide to see a vague area in my subject more clearly. We all do it, but it is not a good idea. Why? Because looking wide-eyed at my subject, I will always see more values than I want or need. Also, the longer I stare at a single spot, such as a cloud in a landscape for example, the more values will appear. This happens because the pupils of my eyes contract to accommodate the brightness, consequently I see **additional** value changes in that one particular spot (as you might see in an underexposed photo). Likewise and inversely, when looking into a dark area with wide open eyes, my pupils enlarge, and I see many more value changes (like an overexposed photo). It is always a matter of judgment about whether or not to include those values. I always make a decision by shifting my gaze away from the light or dark areas, and instead **squint at my subject as a whole**. If the values in question are still visible, I paint **them**.

5. In my art school days, some of my fellow students tried various ways to get around the darkening problem associated with squinting. Incredibly, they first tried simply throwing their eyes out of focus. When they failed, they went to a drugstore and bought strong eyeglasses meant for the nearsighted, which they then wore to make things look fuzzy. They all got headaches from eyestrain and never did succeed in sorting out values. (I tried their gimmicks once too, so I know.) The reason such tricks can't work has something to do with the eye's automatic focusing response and the disorientation which follows when it is frustrated. Working from poorly focused photos has the same unsettling effect. Avoid them. Just squint and use your intelligence to sort things out.

6. Be careful of reflected lights within shadows. They are rarely as light or as colorful as they seem at a casual glance. Squint down at them, and you will see they are **almost always only slightly lighter in value as the overall shadow area**.

7. To underscore what I said at the beginning of this section: please do **not** squint at the image on your canvas. Artists do this all the time because it seems to eliminate mistakes by making everything in their picture look soft and "arty." It is the same device Hollywood uses to film aging movie stars when cameramen use a soft focus lens to obscure wrinkles and freckles. They only kid themselves and so will you. So to repeat again—squint at your subject, but open your eyes to look at your painting! Don't get this backwards! And don't squint at yourself in the mirror. Accept your wrinkles proudly.

CONSERVATION OF VALUES

The Masters who maintained simple value patterns in their paintings seldom used more than five values (except in the transition zones and soft edges between shapes). You can see this dramatically in black and white reproductions of works by Howard Pyle, Serov, Vandyke, Rembrandt, and others, including the best of the great American illustrators. They were stingy with the number of tones they used and never employed more than were necessary. In many of his portraits, Sargent usually employed only three values in the light, two in the darks, and then added only some of the more necessary highlights and dark accents.

This economy or conservation of values is based on two ideas. The first is about design—a few clear-cut values in a painting will yield a more powerful visual effect than a profusion of small values (overmodeling). This is why Impressionistic painting, which as a rule pays little attention to strong value patterns, is not as effective in monochrome reproduction as it is in full color. (Impressionism by its nature is concerned with other effects.)

The second idea is that more often than not it is simply unnecessary to use all values in a subject. Color temperature changes can frequently be used instead. This substitution of color for value is usually not only more pleasing, but also makes better sense. Why? Because we have many more colors (many thousands) than values (nine) at our disposal, so using a color instead saves a value. Superb examples of this use of color are found in the paintings of Mary Cassatt. She had the uncanny ability to portray form with a bare minimum of darkening—a feat impossible without color.



PORTRAIT SKETCH (Detail), oil on canvas, 22 x 18, 1990

The painting above of a beautiful young lady who posed for our painting group in Chicago, was one of the most difficult portraits I have ever dealt with. Not only did she have a dark complexion, but there was strong cold light on her right side, and a warmer light on her left side. So her facial features were defined as much by the shapes created by the lighting, as by the natural anatomical structure of her face.

Édouard Manet, Berthe Morisot, Degas and others were also good at managing values. They understood the weakness in **overmodeling**—the use of too many values to indicate form. All were careful to keep their designs strong by maintaining only a few simple values, clearly establishing their major areas as belonging in either the light or dark patterns, and not invading those areas with needless or inappropriate values. They almost always used a color change instead. (Much more on this is ahead in the chapter on Color.)

Fortunately, we have an unlimited supply of colors and ways to use them. For example, in certain light situations a turn in the form on a subject of as much as 40 degrees can be shown with color temperature changes alone before a change in value becomes necessary. This treatment is mostly an option where the ambient light is very soft, such as north daylight. My personal guideline is to always check if changing the color temperatures of my mixtures will do the job before I change the value.

Value relationships are certainly not all this cut and dried, and there is clearly room to make choices about emphasizing or restraining them to meet your artistic intentions, but keeping your values uncomplicated and few in number is a sound idea no matter what creative changes you do or do not make. It allows you to simplify the way you look at a subject and render it. I also believe from my own experience and seeing the Master's works that it is the primary basis of strong color and design.

TIPS ON VALUES

Watch out for highlights! They are rarely as bright as you think they are. Choose not to paint them at all unless you think they are necessary. (This is especially true in portraits.) If you must paint them, find out what color they are, don't just use white alone. Also, look for one highlight to dominate all others in a painting. This is especially true in painting eyes. The highlight in one eye (usually the nearest to you) always predominates over the other, and neither are as bright as they first appear. Don't just make them white, make them a color (usually it is cool). Squint at them and see!

The same is true for the whites of eyes. They are never white! Usually they are similar in color to surrounding flesh tones, but slightly lighter and less warm (and quite cooler in children's eyes). Also the whites of both eyes in a subject, or the whites on either side of a pupil, are rarely equal in value, and their edges, as all edges in eyes, are **always soft**. Painting things too light or too dark always happens when you fail to accept what you see when you squint, or when you open your eyes to see more clearly. Isn't all of this great to know?

Dark accents, where they are appropriate, are always more effective than highlights. Look for them! Almost always they will be relatively warm in temperature—warmer than any nearby color regardless of the temperature of the light source on the subject. I don't know why this is so, they just are. Usually they will be mixtures of Transparent Oxide Red plus Alizarin Crimson and a mere touch of Ultramarine Blue Deep. Cool colors as dark accents usually produce a "dirty" look. Exceptions where the dark accents actually are cool (relative to surrounding colors) usually involve local color changes at the point of the accent, such as an abrupt pattern change in the folds of fabrics, or more frequently, in landscape painting when many different substances are intermingled (soil, grass, rocks, water, snow, branches, etc.). Transparent substances such as water, ice, snow, clouds, etc., also can have cool dark accents along with warm ones.

Choose to be bold rather than timid with values. Don't hold back when you clearly see strong lights and darks. For example, the most common error I see when students do portraits or figures, is a reluctance to paint dark enough in shadow areas. The main reason this happens is they are afraid the color will not look like "flesh," or it will look "muddy." Neither of these things will happen **if the appropriate color temperature is maintained**. Flesh tones, after all, can be any color—even pitch black when the lights go out!

The other more common reason for painting darks too light is that painters tend to open their eyes to see into the shadows (that natural reflex again). Wide open eyes are great for seeing color, but don't do it for values—squint and compare the shadow to other correctly painted darks.



KILCHURN CASTLE oil on canvas, 8 x 16, Loch Awe, Scotland, 1997

Kilchurn Castle was the very first castle I ever painted. For many years this magnificent 13th century structure stood shrouded behind a dense growth of trees on a small rise on a rocky island on Loch Awe in south central Scotland. In recent years many of the trees had been cleared away and restoration made to the castle. Of course it was a dream come true for me. I was so nervous I was surprised I did as well as I did.

I set up my easel and paints at the edge of the Loch (lake) where I had an unobstructed view of Kilchurn barely fifty yards away. My canvas was quite small, only 8 x 16 inches, and the pattern of lights and darks in the scene was amazingly simple as you can see above. With a minimum of detail to contend with, I was able to concentrate on the six or so major value areas, each with its own fascinating and defining edges.

*Later, while showing the picture to some local Scots, they told me about an old lady who lived alone in the castle's **Keep** (the large open central court within the walls of the castle). She lived there not very long ago when it was still a deserted ruin. The lady raised herbs which she sold in the village. As time went by it was noticed she was not appearing at market with her herbs. An extensive search for her revealed not a trace of her whereabouts, or even if she had ever lived in the castle. Today, however, her ghost is regularly seen at the window of the main tower. Now I do not believe any of that for a minute. I never once saw her during several hours of looking at the castle intensely while I was painting, but it doesn't mean she wasn't there—watching me . . .*

SUMMING UP

1. We only have nine values to work with from white to black. Even if we divided the value scale into a hundred values, the range would still only be from Titanium White to Ivory Black or Lamp Black.
2. It is impossible to duplicate the full range of nature's lights and darks because nature creates colors (and consequently values) with light itself, while our palette pigments create color only by reflection.
3. We can, however, create the *effect* of light by seeking out and using the relationships among values and colors in our pictures.
4. You can easily see those relationships by squinting down at a subject to simplify it until you can see which areas and shapes are lightest, darkest, and which fall into a limited range of middle tones.
5. Constantly compare values in a subject to one another to make judgments (while squinting) about which values in a subject are lightest, darkest, etc. To make things easier, use a standard of comparison such as a pure white or black in the subject to make those calls. I'm told Sorolla kept a clean white handkerchief with him when he painted, which he would toss into or onto his subject to remind himself of what white really looks like.
6. Overmodeling and running out of values can be avoided by substituting color changes for value changes whenever possible.
7. If you wish, you can create a stronger design structure in a painting by restricting the number of values in the major areas.
8. Paint standing up if you can and step back frequently to view your entire painting and compare it to the entire subject. Sitting for too long and too close to a painting almost guarantees mistakes.

PRACTICE THE SKILL OF SQUINTING AND COMPARING UNTIL THEY BECOME A HABIT SECOND NATURE TO YOU, LIKE LOOKING BOTH WAYS BEFORE YOU CROSS A BUSY STREET.

BELIEVE AND ACCEPT THE *RELATIONSHIPS* YOU OBSERVE WHEN YOU SQUINT, AND NEVER DOUBT THEM.

AFTER YOU HAVE THE INFORMATION ABOUT VALUES YOU NEED FROM SQUINTING—WHICH ARE THE LIGHTEST LIGHTS, DARKEST DARKS, MIDDLE TONES, ETC.—OPEN YOUR EYES NORMALLY THEN TO SEE THE TRUE VALUES AND COLORS IN ORDER TO PAINT THEM.



IMAGE ONE



IMAGE TWO



IMAGE THREE

These photos are one example of what to look for when you squint at a subject. **Image one** shows what the subject normally looks like. Notice how much detail there is throughout the photo and the number of value changes everywhere except the sky, which is very simple in value.

Image two is what you would probably see squinting down halfway. What you should look for here is the way some values have merged and become simplified. Notice how the church, the foreground and some of the background trees have joined to form a **single** value shape. Notice as well all superfluous detail is simply no longer there.

Image three is what you will see when you squint down a lot more. Notice how the scene as a whole has been reduced to three major values. The sky, two headstones and the little dots for flowers are now easily seen as the lightest lights in the whole scene. The roof of the church and the slash of sunlight on the grass are the middle tone. And the trees and foreground and shadow side of the church are the darkest dark. Knowing the lightest lights, the middle tones, the darkest darks, and which values are equal—all of this is invaluable information.



SHANNON ONE

Here are more examples of what to discover about your subject (SHANNON ONE, above) when you squint down at it gradually. Remember, squinting is not meant to be a way of seeing the **true** values in a subject. The true values are the ones you see when you view your subject without squinting. The purpose of squinting is to make judgments about the **relationships** among and between values. In other words you squint down not to see how light or dark things **really** are, but rather which values are lightest compared to all the others, which are darkest, and which fall into the middle tones.

The lightest lights, darkest darks, and clear middle tones are the important relationships to recognize in any subject, because they help make judgments about the lightness or darkness of the other more subtle values, and they help in creating a more powerful design.

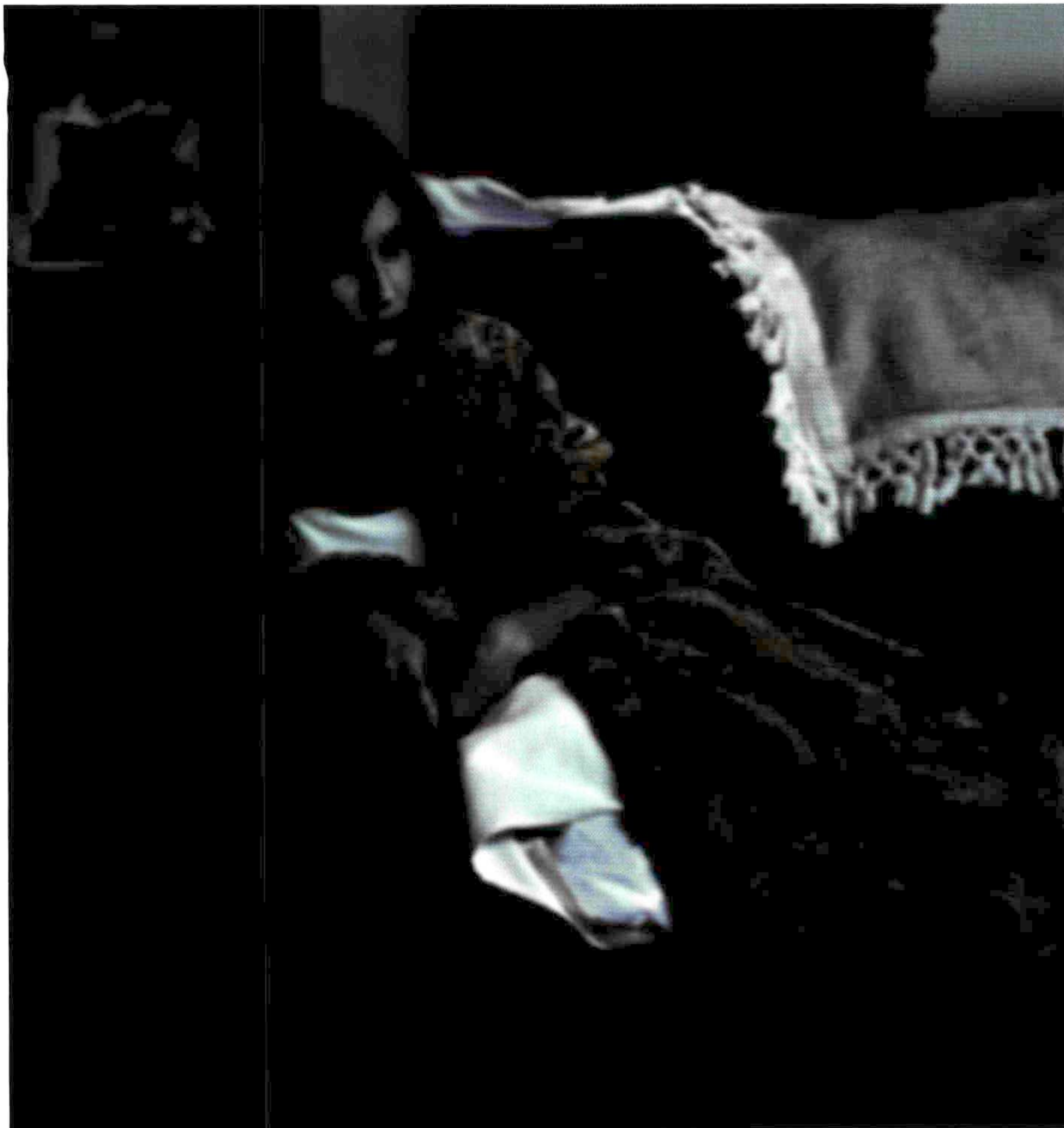


SHANNON TWO

SHANNON TWO shows how squinting down, even just a little, eliminates smaller details so the values in the couch, the darks in Shannon's hair and blouse, her robe, and the dark values in Nancy's painting behind the model, are all coming together to form a single value shape—imagine how just this small amount of squinting makes a block-in so much easier!

At this degree of squinting, you will also begin to notice how almost every other area of the subject has become simplified. The pattern in the robe is still apparent, but the pattern and the shadows together have been slightly joined and reduced to two values rather than the original five or six values (yet another help in blocking-in).

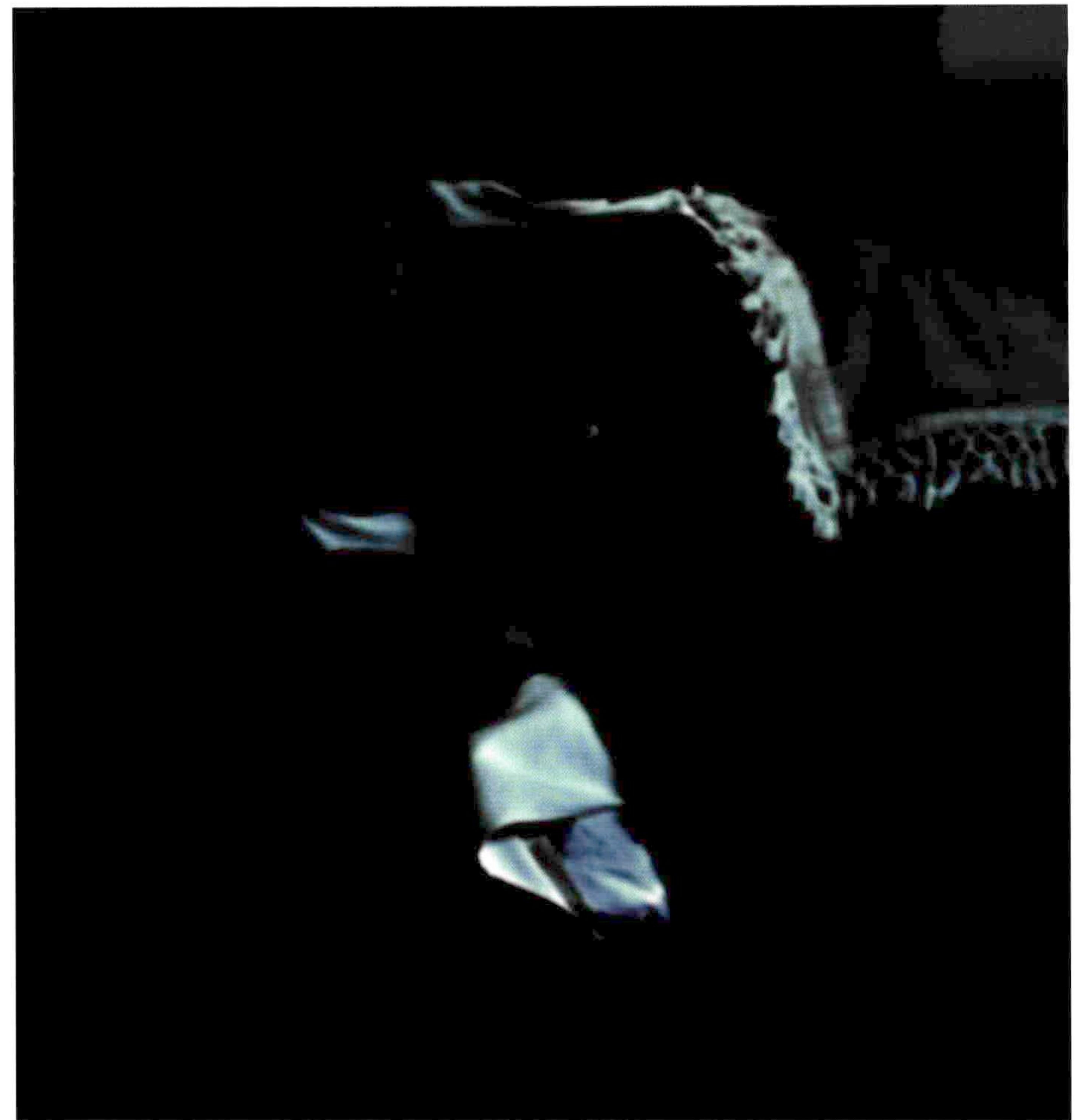
Always remember: open your eyes to see the true colors, and squint down to see the relationships between values and edges.



SHANNON THREE

SHANNON THREE demonstrates clearly the value of how skillful squinting makes almost every subject instantly understandable! How clear it is now! If you observe carefully there are only two values in the light parts and pretty much only one value in all of the dark areas.

Now the painting becomes pure enjoyment to finish, because reducing the subject to its essentials has gotten all the hard stuff out of the way. You can see now that squinting down to see the larger value relationships is basically a process of elimination—as you squint down bit by bit, more and more of the nonessentials vanish into larger, more understandable and masterful value shapes, and are thus greatly helpful in doing a well drawn block-in, and a well drawn block-in is almost a finished painting!



SHANNON FOUR

SHANNON FOUR—If there is the slightest doubt about which values are the lightest lights in any subject, squint down until you have reduced your subject to two values as shown above. This is about as simple as things can get while squinting. If you should squint any further until all you see is black, it could mean you have fallen asleep.

Quite seriously now, I must tell you this section was not easy to write. This is mainly because the intent is to see relationships rather than true values. But then, when it comes to doing the painting you must switch your thinking back to what the actual values are. It takes practice but once you learn to use this simple technique with your eyes it will be a part of every solution you employ in creating a painting. In many ways, these two pages are the most important in this book.



PARKBENCH oil on panel, 8 x 12, Madrid, Spain, 1994

This small sketch of a couple in a park in Madrid was painted on a fairly rough textured, white lead Masonite panel. I mention the texture because it was the key to achieving many of the loose edges you see above. I doubt a more refined and detailed rendering on a smooth ground could equal the painterly strength of this work.

Speculation has it this is actually a painting of Nancy and myself. By chance we did happen to be in Retiro Park in Madrid on that very day, and so it is altogether possible I painted us with my right hand, which you will note—is not visible.

CHAPTER SIX—EDGES

Think about edges the way you would think about kissing someone. *How many are the ways—and what can you impart in the process?* Think of edges as the most exquisite of subtleties, as the means to open the secret recesses of the heart. Edges are ways to make your dabs of paint whisper, or shout, and reach nuances which can amplify your palette of colors. Think of them as visual poetry oozing from your brush—but especially think of edges as you would the agents of expression in music.

It is surprising how many parallels there are between music and painting. We artists speak of harmony, tones, rhythm, notes, form, composition, and so on—words which are also common musical terms. I think of edges as *pianissimo* (very soft), *andante* (flowing), *allegro vivace* (fast and lively), *maestoso* (majestic), *fortissimo con sforzando* (whamo!). These beautiful adjectives are used in musical phrasing to designate the *physical* manner in which keys, valves, strings, or drums, are touched (*legato*, *staccato*, etc.), as well as the way they are strung together (phrasing). While there is certainly no exact correlation between music and painting, certain comparisons are valid about the various ways we "touch" a painting with our "notes" of color. A wide variation of touch and speed gives music its richness of expression, and *a lavish variety of edges does the same thing in painting*.

Each time we touch a brush to canvas we create edges. It is the character of those edges—the gradual or abrupt way with which they merge with other strokes—that makes all the difference.

This difference is not only about the lyrical quality of our painting, it is also crucial to whether or not our work appears convincing. Why? Because you and I focus our eyes in a uniquely selective way when we look at things in the course of our daily routines. Only a small area at the center of our gaze is in perfect focus; all the rest is relatively indistinct. Because of our binocular vision we also see slightly around the edges of objects (an effect which diminishes with the square of its distance from us). Edges are the only visual tools I am aware of which can replicate that special way of focusing. We see in ways no cameras or recording devices can quite duplicate (not yet anyway). So far, only a certain type of highly skilled painting can come close to the way we humans actually see things (because the seeing painter *is* the recording device). If we are sensitive to the wide variety of edges in our subject, and we can translate them into appropriately hard or soft transitions between color shapes, there will be magic in our painting. If we ignore edges, our work will be flat and unconvincing, rather like computer generated voices. Remember, I am referring here only to painting which attempts to create an illusion of a person's ordinary visual reality. All other ways of realistic painting, while unquestionably valid in terms of artistic license, are deviations from, or changed versions, of nature. Obviously non-representational art is playing an entirely different game, and is not relevant here.

Superb displays of edges are present in most of the masterpieces of representational painting beginning about the time of Velasquez and Hals and continuing through the beginning of the 20th century. Virtuosos of edges were keenly aware of them and made full use of their potential. Today, however, edges are probably the least understood of our tools. Since the 1930s, except for the teachings of people like Bill Mosby, and the work of some distinguished illustrators, the skills attending edges appear to have gradually declined in painting. To my knowledge, not much has been written at length about them in the past. However, I have noticed an increase of interest in the subject since *Alla Prima* was published in 1998. My hope is that instruction on the use of edges will soon be presented on an equal basis with drawing, values, and color in realistic painting classes. It won't be easy or happen overnight because there is something uncomfortably elusive about them. Their very nature makes them difficult to measure or define, and much in our perception of edges, as well as our judgment in rendering them, is purely subjective. The good news is there are things about edges which are *not* arbitrary. Nevertheless, if violin or piano, or vocal technique can be taught, so can expressive edges. Let us explore them together here.



LILIES oil on canvas, 12 x 8, 2004



DAFFODIL AND ROSES (Detail), oil on panel, 12 x 8

EXACTLY WHAT ARE EDGES ANYWAY?

Edges are the borderlines between the shapes of color we see on our subjects, and the corresponding color shapes we create on our paintings. Each color shape has at least three sides, and they fit together like nations on a map, or pieces in a puzzle. Those boundaries (edges) are designated as either relatively "hard" or "soft" in varying degrees. The hardness or softness of the edges describes the *transitions* between those shapes—the degree to which they are blended, or not blended at all. They can be extremely abrupt (hard or sharp edge), or very gradual (soft edge), or somewhere in-between. For those "in-between" edges, let's call them "moderate" or "intermediate." When a shape of color blends into another so gradually it is impossible to tell where one begins and the other ends, it is called a *lost* edge.

Unfortunately, we lack the rich vocabulary to describe edges any better. Unlike our musician friends, we labor without the technical expressions which could specify exactly how soft or hard an edge might be. All we have are a few adjectives: soft, moderate, hard (or sharp), and lost. That's about it except for words like fuzzy, hazy, blurred, firm, razor sharp, or modifiers such as very, medium, extremely, and so on—not much to choose from. Nevertheless, we shall carry on and examine three important aspects of edges:

1. HOW AND WHY THEY OCCUR IN A SUBJECT.
2. HOW TO IDENTIFY THEIR VISIBLE CHARACTERISTICS.
3. HOW TO TRANSLATE THEM INTO BRUSHSTROKES.

THE CAUSES OF EDGES IN A SUBJECT

If you are new to the use of edges, or have trouble seeing them, it may help to begin by understanding how they occur. Start by looking carefully at something—anything. Look around the room where you sit reading this, look out the window, or just glance at yourself in a mirror, and you will see edges wherever any two or more visible shapes meet. Here are the main reasons they appear the way they do:

- A. The inherent shape of things. Often you can expect to see soft edges on rounded objects such as anatomical features, the folds in fabrics, or a field of grass curving slowly away. Anything angular or sheared, like a sheet of paper or a stiff collar, or architectural forms, may seem sharply edged.
- B. The intrinsic ("local") value and color of things (like a yellow dress or black hat). Elements or shapes which are similar in value or color will appear to have a softer transition between them than elements which contrast, even though the real (physical) edge is hard. For example: If you place a dark blue against a dark green, their boundary will look softer than if the colors are dark blue against bright orange.
- C. The nature of things—what they are made of—clouds, curly blond hair, and the rear ends of ducks are likely to have softer edges than bricks or door frames. The substances of things, however, are not always a reliable guide in determining an edge.
- D. The light—how strong, or weak, or diffused it is, and the angle it is striking the subject. A single powerful light source such as the sun or a spotlight striking a subject at right angles to you will likely produce sharp edges, usually as cast shadows. On the other hand, north daylight or overcast light will yield softly diffused edges. Hard edges in diffuse light are mainly the result of something other than the light, such as the edge of a white collar against a dark suit.



MOUNT MORAN (Detail), oil on canvas, 24 x 36, Jackson Hole, Wyoming, 1968



ATLANTIC SEAS (Detail), oil on canvas, 24 x 36, Monhegan Island, Maine, 1976

The importance of appropriate edges in painting is clearly demonstrated in the two works above. In MOUNT MORAN (top) the bright sunlight, crisp shadows and rock formations call for an entirely different and harder set of edges than in the painting of ATLANTIC SEAS (bottom). In this the atmosphere and character of the breaking waves demands an abundant variety of soft and almost completely lost edges. One could almost imagine the artistic disaster if I had gotten the two works mixed up regarding edges.

E. The atmosphere—how clear or murky it is. This is a familiar concern in landscape and marine painting, though it occasionally happens indoors as well. The clarity of the air, a clear day for example, or the lack of it, as on a foggy morning, is a strong influence on the quality of the light, and that, in turn, affects edges. Most edges in a landscape tend to soften with distance. Fog and haze, for example, dramatically subdue edges with distance, while clear air can often maintain somewhat sharper edges at long distances. This is a problem I am familiar with having lived at a high altitude in the unusually clear air in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado. Very often distant mountains and other landscape features appeared almost as close as nearby ranges. The clear thin air at the high altitude prevailed over the familiar effect of aerial perspective by greatly subduing the value changes which normally occur with distance—very annoying. John Singer Sargent complained about it too when he painted in the Canadian Rocky Mountains because he was more accustomed to the atmospheric effects of the European Alps, which receive vast amounts of humid air from the Mediterranean. I noted the same increase in values and color when I did Alpine studies in the Südtirol of Northern Italy.

F. Motion. To our eyes, things blur when they move. If you paint moving things with hard edges it will look as if you copied a high-speed photograph. Ocean waves, flying birds, waterfalls, trees in the wind, and everything else that moves must be carefully studied as edge problems. I believe the subject ought to be movement itself, rather than the thing in motion—the flight of a flying bird, for example, not how pretty or authentically rendered its feathers are. Nearly all movement in nature occurs as repetitive flow. Even when things appear to change randomly and unpredictably (like cloud shapes), their movements have a pattern which can be understood. Take the time necessary to see such patterns—notice shapes which happen with predictable frequency, as in waves breaking on a shore, or streaming into rocks in a brook. Then paint them with a variety of appropriately soft and hard edges (a certain amount of experimenting is usually necessary). The result will be surprisingly convincing.

A note of caution—there is rarely a single cause for the appearance of an edge. The way it looks in a subject is usually a combination of some factors described above. Atmosphere, light, values, colors, motion, textures and form, can intermingle in bewildering ways. It is interesting to figure out what you are looking at, but don't worry if you can't explain it. It is more important to simply *recognize* edges. I recognize countless everyday things and deal with them successfully without understanding them in the slightest—for example, my tax returns and the computer on which I am typing this. Seriously, as a general policy, it is a good idea to try and place the very sharpest edges in your painting within or near the focal point of a painting, because we see that way naturally. Glance around and you will see that it is impossible to focus on any one thing and still have sharp edges in your peripheral vision.

AWARENESS OF EDGES

Using the information from the five points I have just described, look again at something near and familiar. The kitchen with its pots and pans is a good place (vegetables and fruits always have great edges too). The bedroom is ideal too—you can take your clothes off and check out your own edges in the mirror—or go out where you can see land and trees and a sky full of clouds (but put your clothes back on first).

Select some individual things, then ask yourself these questions to help you understand what you are seeing:

Is the edge of the shape you are looking at curving away from you or toward you?

Is the curve, if there is one, smooth and gradual or abrupt? Is the color shape you are looking at the same color or value as adjacent shapes, or is it a different color and value?

Are you looking at something hard to simplify, things unclear or complex, like clouds, hair, or myriad tree branches and tall grass in the wind—or is it something geometric with sharp angles such as buildings or rock formations?

Are your shapes in snappy bright sunlight, or are they back in the dim shadows?

Are you in subdued north daylight or overcast with no cast shadows?

In the landscape, is it foggy out or clear? Does the clarity of the air decrease or increase with distance?

Answering questions like these will go a long way toward identifying the edges on the things you wish to paint, but don't go overboard with analysis. All you really need is the ability to spot edges as hard or soft or something in between. Figuring out the cause of an edge does come in handy when you find yourself in the occasional predicament of not being able to make up your mind about an edge. However, it is not essential to have a rational explanation to paint it convincingly. For example, if you recognize a soft edge, that's really all the information you need! It isn't necessary to know *why* it is soft. ***Just paint it the way it looks!*** Besides (and this is important), understanding the causes of edges is not enough. You must also be able to determine their relationships—how hard or soft they are *compared* to one another.

SEEING EDGES SELECTIVELY—LEARNING TO STEP BACK, SQUINT, AND COMPARE

Seeing edges requires the same two important aids—squinting and comparison—which I described in the previous chapter on Values. They are essential in working with edges, and I find it is best to do them together. Let me dwell on squinting first. Read what follows next very carefully. This is hard stuff to write about.

Squinting applies to seeing both edges and values in a remarkably similar way, though it does tend to work a little better with values. Closing your eyes slightly when looking at your subject to simplify will give you equivalent information about both. Just as you half-closed your eyes to determine the lightest light, the darkest darks, and the ranking of middle values, so too will squinting help you to see which edges are sharpest, which are softest, and which fall into a middle range. It allows you to see where things blend the most, where they stand out distinctly, and the pecking order of all the remaining edges. It is an amazingly simple and effective technique. The aim is to obtain an orderly grasp of the edges in your subject. That means you will get practical information—the evaluations you need to paint your picture—rather than just seeing a dark fuzzy image of your subject.

Doing it proficiently takes concentration, but it's worth any effort to get good at it. Try practicing it at first with a typical subject, something with lots of high contrast elements. It's easier too when you're just starting out with this to get the hang of it with a well-lit subject instead of practicing on something low-keyed and subtle. Outdoors on a sunny day in your backyard or looking down your street is a good place for starters. It isn't necessary to paint. Just pour yourself a glass of iced tea (nothing stronger, if you please), sit down, and notice some specific things.

Begin with your eyes wide open. See how sharply focused everything is, and how much detail there is. Notice how the longer you look at one particular spot, more and more details emerge. Notice too how you see many color and value changes, and how all edges appear clear and crisp the more you look directly at them. **If your eyesight is good, you probably can now see more sharp edges and itsy-bitsy detail than you would ever want to paint.**

Now close your eyes just a tiny fraction. Note that some detail diminishes, some values and colors merge, and some edges begin to lose a bit of clarity. (The first edges to disappear completely will be the soft transitions in the subject.) You are now beginning to simplify your subject.

At this point you need to be particularly alert. Notice exactly which details diminish and which values and colors blend into larger shapes. See how many of the tiny clear edges you could see with your eyes wide open now begin to join to form larger softer edges. Make note too of the things which do NOT change very much as you squint. See which shapes and edges retain their integrity. Those will be your stronger sharper-edged elements.

YORKSHIRE CHURCHYARD

oil on panel, 8 x 12, 1994

This is the only painting of mine I have ever copied. It was promised for a one-man show, but I was so fond of it, I did a larger version for the exhibition—slightly cooler and minus the iron gate. I felt the differences would avoid any future confusion.

I kept this original version because it touched me in a way few other of my paintings ever do, primarily because Nancy is the main subject, and secondly, I caught the hushed English light, which I also love.

I also managed to capture, after many tries, the elusive green color of the grass peculiar to the British Isles and other places, such as our Pacific Northwest and Alaska. In this case, the mixture turned out to be mainly Viridian, Yellow Ochre light, and White, with a bit of Cadmium Yellow in places.

This little sketch may bring to mind some of the works of the 19th Century Naturalist painters, such as Bastien-Lepage, Jean Dagnan-Bouveret and others. I'm not a fan of the storytelling so characteristic of their output, but I felt I had matched something of their technical effects, and perhaps taken them a step further regarding edges.

It is possible the Naturalists' often heavy reliance on photographs accounts for their more conservative renderings when it came down to ways of putting paint on canvas. I have long felt the beauty of paint itself should be an important part of a work, which is why I was pleased to capture what I feel is a more painterly effect, especially in the trees and sky.

The interplay of hard and soft transitions, along with the rich (middle-toned) color harmony, also added a mood so dreamlike I almost thought Nancy might slowly vanish before my eyes.



Good! Close your eyes a bit more and see how things simplify even more. (Sounds like the last chapter, doesn't it?) Note how the strong shapes now tend to dominate and absorb smaller shapes. See how edges within dark value areas tend to be much softer than edges in the higher contrast light areas, and how detail tends to disappear altogether in the darkest darks. The very last discernible edge you see before your eyes shut will probably be the sharpest edge of all. It will also be the lightest light. (See where I'm going here?)

What I have described is an orderly and effective way of simplifying. It is orderly because you can close your eyes down just a bit at a time, noting how edges appear at each stage. It is effective because you learn something you can express as brushstrokes, and that is precisely what you are after. So, here is a little myth you can shatter at cocktail parties—when we painters look at things, we do not see more than other people, we see less. We do not see beauty where others cannot, but we do have the ability to stop the stream of time, to eliminate trivia, and thus understand why things look the way they do. In doing so we can concentrate a viewer's attention on the fascination of the purely visual. We can simplify things and arrest them at any moment of their happening.

Let me repeat—squinting is not helpful in determining color, but it works like magic in seeing edges. Once you get the hang of it, you will use it to see edges and values simultaneously. Just don't squint down to the point where your image is so dark and blurred it is useless.

Lastly, it only works marginally when working with photographs. Squinting at a photo is about the same as squinting at a painting. Everything gets fuzzy. Squinting for values in a photo is sometimes useful, but because of the limited data caught by the camera, the information you can obtain is inadequate compared to the real thing.

COMPARISON

Some edges in every subject will stand out conspicuously as either extremely sharp or completely lost even with your eyes wide open. You can't miss them (clouds, for example). Use those edges as your standards of comparison. Let us say you are looking at what you think is a hard edge, but you don't know *how* hard. Well, if you have already selected a razor-sharp edge in the subject as your hardest, you only need to compare the edge in question to *that* edge to see the difference. The same holds true, of course, for soft edges. Pick one you are sure of to be your standard of comparison, and use it to judge the relative softness of others.

As you become aware of edges, you will discover their close tie to values. Their interrelationship stems from the fact that they arise mutually. They often happen together from the same circumstances and operate as a sort of feedback system. Values and edges reciprocate in the ways they influence each other, just as values and colors do.

It is amazing and beautiful how this works—how all elements in the visual field are unavoidably *interconnected* like the *Net of Indra* so well described by Joseph Campbell in *The Power of Myth* (Doubleday 1988). The Net is an infinite mythical web with precious stones at every intersection of its threads so each gem reflects all the others, symbolizing the universal connection of everything. In the same way, *everything visible looks the way it does because of everything else visible acting upon it.*

Shapes with similarities in color or value will appear to have soft edges connecting them, and shapes with dissimilar properties will seem to have harder edges—even when the actual (physical) edge is the same. For example, two adjacent shapes (or brushstrokes) of similar value will appear to have a soft edge between them because the value difference is small. Conversely, the illusion of a hard edge is likely when you bring together shapes which contrast sharply in value or color—as when you join a deep blue-purple shape with a very light yellow-orange shape. Intrinsically soft things like clouds at sunset can often *appear* to have less than soft edges because of the bright sky behind them. So we now see that a very soft or lost edge between contrasting values and colors can tend to diminish the value difference between them, while a hard edge between similar values and colors can exaggerate their difference. *Thus, edges can make values look the way they do—and values can make edges look the way they do.* I like that.



LOVELAND GENTLEMAN oil on canvas, 16 x 18, 1995

The *size* of a shape in itself can determine how light or dark things will look even if they are the same intrinsic value—a large black mass of trees is blacker than a little black bush, and so on. The same is true of color. A whole wall painted red is "redder" than a small drop of the same paint. In my painting *Study in Red* (opposite), the red on the model's lower lip is identical to the red on her blouse, yet the blouse seems far more red. This saturation effect of large value or color areas is partly a psychological anomaly. I would add the smaller shape will also have softer edges, and the smaller things get, the more their edges soften.

While these observations are obviously valid and good to know, in practice other factors can often intervene. Things like the angle of the light, reflected light, the material composition of the subject and its three-dimensional configuration, to name just a few. (There are many others.) Nature is so full of tricks, there is no reliable way to contrive a formula which applies in all circumstances. In the end, only your own well-trained eye is reliable.

Natural phenomena will also affect both values and edges (and color as well). Fog or mist or light intensity will influence values, edges, and color simultaneously, or even a single change in one will change the others. For example, a change in value will always mean a consequent change in color (because you must use another color to lighten or darken something), and that will create a change in the edge. You have to be ready for anything!

Unfortunately, there are no set rules about edges. Like naughty little boys, they behave as they wish and enjoy teasing. What appears in one situation may not occur in another. There are too many variables (including your own eyesight) to allow for solid predictability. However, it is extremely helpful to know how these natural illusions (that's what they are) do happen. So be on the lookout and just *accept* them. After all, your job is to create a picture of the way things look to you. If you try to clarify things for your viewer based solely upon what the rules say ought to be there, your painting will not look like your subject does. I strongly recommend painting an edge as it APPEARS, regardless of anything else you know about it.

One school of thought in the early part of the 20th century was definitely *not* in favor of softening edges. One well-known spokesman warned against softening *anything—edges in particular*. I'm not sure why such an idea happened. It certainly wasn't ignorance, or lack of experience in painting from life. Most likely the practice of painting clear-cut edges no-matter-what arose because of the perceived importance in those days (as it is often today) of being recognized for having a strong style. Consequently, natural effects were often altered to fit an artist's misplaced need for stylistic technique.

The rejection of obviously varied edges could also have arisen from the brief popularity of palette knife painting at the time—a technique which almost naturally produced hard edges. Knife painting in general was rather heavy-handed and usually applied thickly, like stucco, unlike the more sophisticated and subtle technique of the contemporaneous Russian school. The Russians viewed the knife as a tool of great expressive potential, instead of a kind of small trowel to plaster pigments on canvas. Nicolai Fechin's early work contains many examples of virtuoso knife painting.

A more widespread reason for not blending was probably the trend to use *incremental* color transitions at edges—several small color changes applied side by side to show a change of form. No doubt that was the influence of Impressionism, because it was the practice then to favor small, distinct, color graduations over blending. The influence of the Impressionists continued full-tilt long after the charter group disappeared. (The original French movement lasted a mere 20 years or so.)

Others might have been reacting to what they considered to be the *misuse* of blending—the *feathering* or fusing of colors to achieve more softly graduated edges. Some regarded blending as leading to superficial overblending. (The word feathering, or to feather, presumably originated from the old practice of using the large wing feathers of geese as blending tools.) At any rate, and for whatever reason, there arose simultaneously one school, the "*brush men*," such as Boldini, Zorn, and Sargent, with their very long, fluidly sexy brushing techniques, and a separate group, the "*colorists*," who would not dream of applying more than a half-inch of paint without changing the color—your basic broken color enthusiasts. The most uptight of them was Georges Seurat.



STUDY IN RED oil on canvas, 14 x 18, 1993

So we now see once again how a very *soft* or *lost edge* between *contrasting* values and colors can tend to *diminish the value difference* between them, while a *hard edge* between *similar* values and colors can *exaggerate* their difference. Thus, *edges can make values look the way they do*—and *values can make edges look the way they do*. I like that, but it's not always easy to see.

No doubt it is good to intellectually analyze and understand what we see, but I have found that squinting down and using comparison is still the easiest and best way to make decisions about edges both in my subjects and my paintings. I realize I must seem to go on endlessly about stepping back, squinting, and comparing, but those three little practices are essential to seeing, and they always lead to simple, elegant results.

It is not difficult to develop an awareness of the light conditions around you. For me, mornings have a completely different mood than evenings. They even smell different. Dark rainy days are dramatically different than bright sunny days. Those are obvious examples of extremes. As painters we must cultivate a sensitivity to those days, as well as the less extreme conditions we will find ourselves working under.

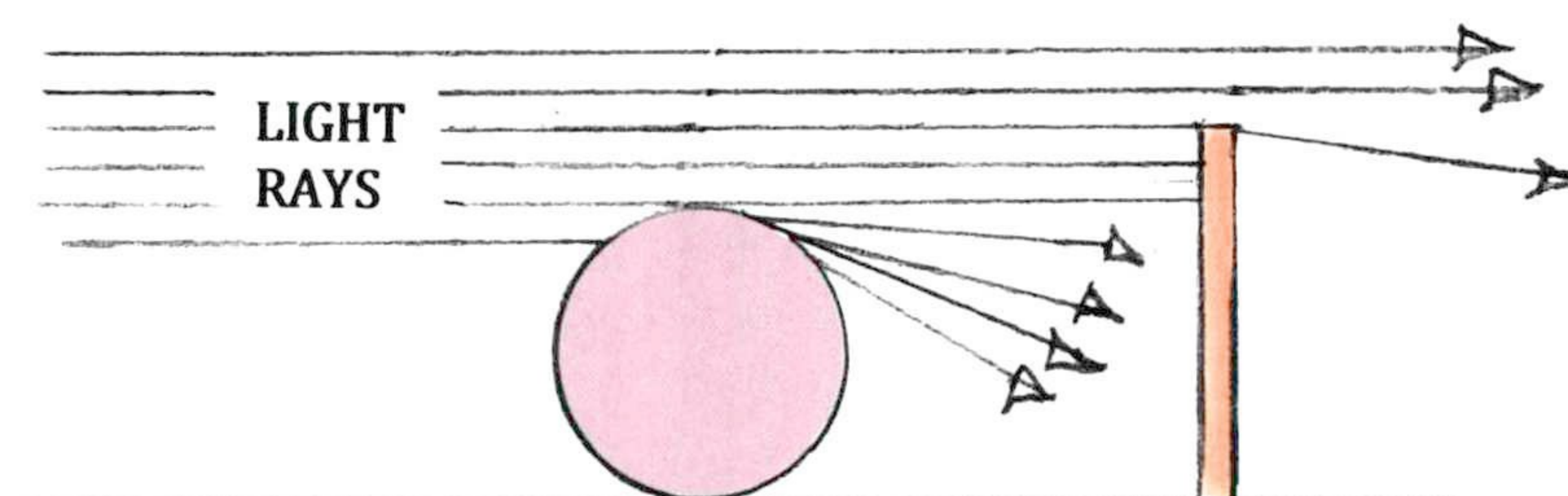
I recommend painting an edge as it looks on a subject, regardless of anything else you know about it, unless of course you have a good reason to do things differently. To me, a very good reason for any change in a painting is that I just like it better that way.

OTHER "WHYS" OF MANY TYPES OF EDGES AND VALUES

As landscape painting developed, many painters became aware of the effect of *light diffraction* on edges and values. What is diffraction? It is the fact that light can bend slightly at an object's edge. If you take two objects of the same value (let's say black), one rounded, like a vase, and the other angular, like a piece of cardboard, and look at them against a light source (such as the sky or a window), the rounded one will have softer edges, and the angular one will be hard edged.

Likewise, if you do the same test with two more shapes, *but of the same value*, and one very much larger than the other, the smaller one will look lighter. In both instances this happens because of *diffraction*—light bending and spilling around the edges of shapes—in this case much more light spilling around in ratio to an object's size and curvature in the smaller one than in the larger one. For example, a pointed church steeple will appear progressively lighter as you gaze from its wide base to its narrowing peak.

This phenomenon is perfectly shown on the page opposite—notice how light is spilling around the vase from the window behind it. It also strikes the model's left shoulder and neck, highlighting the anatomy.



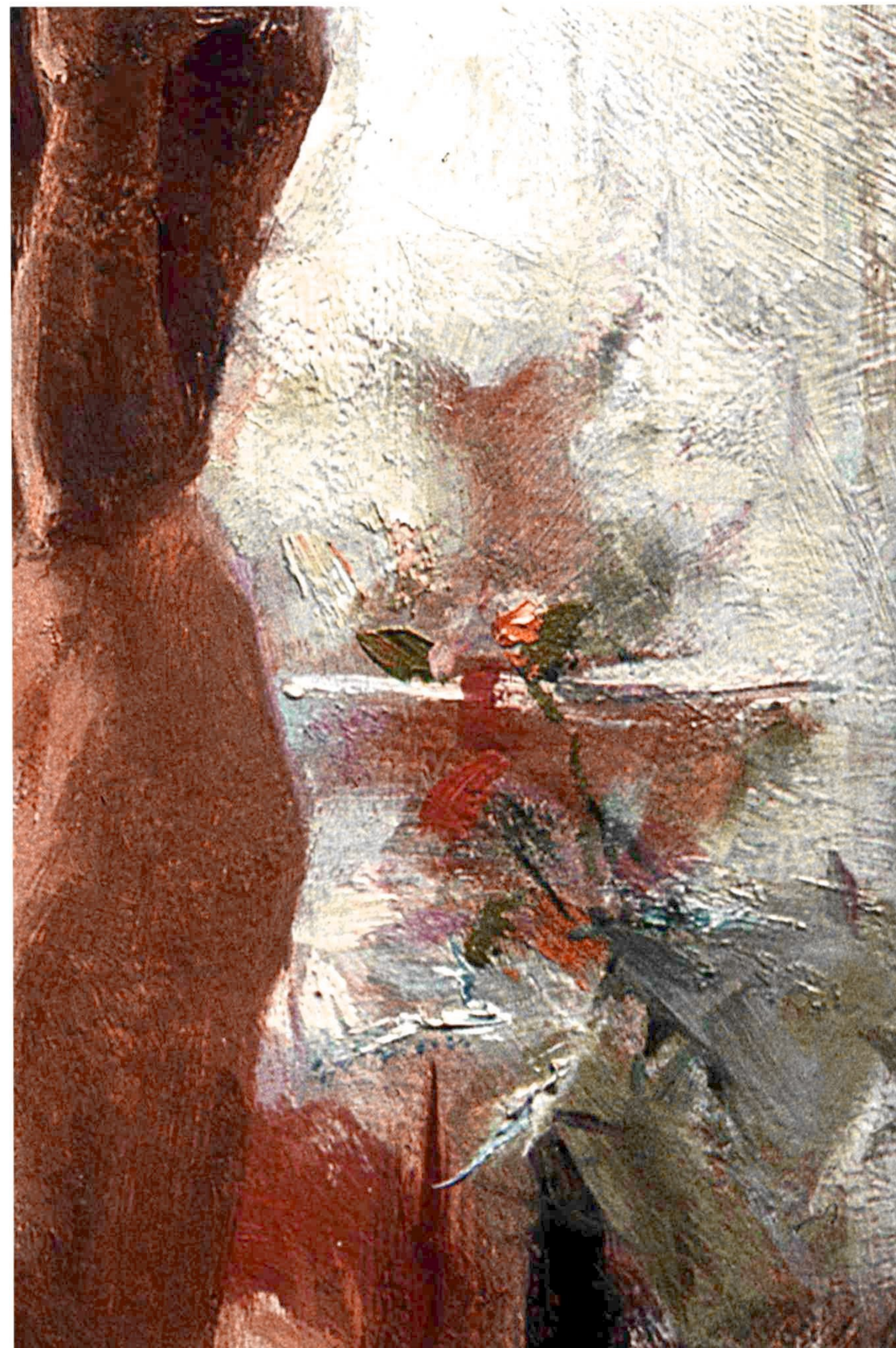
DIFFRACTION occurs when light rays meet an object and bend slightly around it (more so on rounded objects).

The light diffracted around this steeple is more apparent on the narrowing tip than on the thick base, causing the tip to look lighter.





STANDING FIGURE oil on panel, 12 x 18, 1969



STANDING FIGURE (Detail)

This painting shows a variety of light effects. My model is standing close to the corner of a room in which there are two windows providing natural daylight (cool light-warm shadows). The window behind her has caused the model's upper torso to appear almost in silhouette, while the area of her hips is mostly illuminated by the side window. The bottom half of the painting is softly shaded. With such a setup, diffraction of light and diffusion of light throughout the painting are mixing, resulting in a fascinating play of soft color, light, and edges. Trying to figure out, much less analyze, the situation is quite hopeless for me. Instead, I rely solely upon painting what I see, whether or not I understand it intellectually.

To smoosh the paint around or not to smoosh—*that* is the question! (Forgive me, Dear Bard.) Whether 'tis nobler in the mind or better in a painting to blend edges, ah! To soften them as a sparrow's touchdown, or to paint small increments of color changes? It comes down to a matter of personal taste. Monet lived and breathed color changes; Zorn preferred the broad brush style with voluptuous edges on equally voluptuous ladies. Both created marvelous paintings. We all have our ways, thank God. In the end, what really matters is achieving our intended effects. How we get there is of no importance. Only the result counts. Personally I like to have as many options as possible, and I would not rule out anything if it works. What follows here is some of what works.

CREATING EDGES IN A PAINTING

How can paint be manipulated so it duplicates the look of the edges you see in your subject? *Physically*, there are really only three ways I know of.

1. By degrees of *blending* (soft edges), or refraining from blending (hard).
2. By mixing and applying intermediate colors *instead of* blending.
3. Applying intermediate colors *and* blending them (carefully).

BLENDING

This is familiar to everyone who works with oil paint. (Watercolorists blend too, of course, but in entirely different ways.) You find out how easy it is to do right away. It is one of the most appealing characteristics of the medium. Usually it is done by mixing edges together with a clean dry brush while the paint is still wet. These wet-into-wet edges can be produced with your brush, your fingers, a rag, a palette knife, or anything else that does the job. The best way to learn is to experiment until you get a "feel" for how paint behaves and what your tools can do. There is no right way or wrong way to do it; there is only the method that works the way you want it to. Just avoid overly thick paint until you get the hang of it.

CREATING EDGES WITH INTERMEDIATE COLORS

The few strict colorists among the Impressionists, such as Mary Cassatt and Renoir, were not the first to recognize that boundaries (edges) between shapes of color also had color changes within those edges, but they certainly latched on to it. In particular they showed us how much color there really is in reality to take advantage of. They used distinct graduations of color to soften edges, rather than merging shapes with the swipe of a brush as brushmen like Sargent and Zorn did. This is certainly no criticism here of their blending technique.

Blending after all involves changes of color as well. They are much smaller and more gradual changes. (Besides, the brush enthusiasts were pursuing something else). The Impressionists realized that by adding the element of color changes to the qualities of hardness and softness in edges, it enhanced the overall brilliance of their paintings. Edges can be rich in color changes, no doubt about it. If you want a dramatic demonstration, stand outside during a sunset and witness the color changes occurring as the sun goes over the horizon and the edge of the earth's shadow overtakes you. In twenty minutes or so colors in the landscape around you can change from bright yellow orange, to red, to deep blue and violet. This same transition of colors can happen on a smaller scale as light moves into shadow on the edges of your subjects.

*SUSAN LYON**oil on canvas, 20 x 16**Palette & Chisel, Chicago, 1989*

I remember every moment of painting Sue Lyon. At the time we were all much younger and Sue had not yet developed into the fine painter she is today. Painting this along with Nancy, Rose Frantzen, and Scott Burdick (later Susan's husband), was an extraordinary experience. I was in my third term as President of The Palette and Chisel.

Nancy, Rose, and Scott were becoming very accomplished, not to mention impassioned in their work. They were all so very determined and dedicated, and I loved working with them.

When Sue posed for us with her flowing blonde hair and soft features, she was a perfect study in edges, which the group was most interested in at the time (except perhaps for Scotty, who had a slightly different interest in her edges than the rest of us).

I realized I had to capture the quality of her hair as simply and directly as possible in my block-in. If you could see the original (which is in my collection), you would notice her hair is entirely rendered in the transparent paint of my block-in. The rest of the painting is almost a library of possible edges executed in both opaque and transparent paint. In those days each study I did with my friends Nancy, Rose, and Scott were experiments. This work of Sue has always been my favorite.



Please bear in mind the amount of color in edges does depend on the values and the character of the things you are painting. For example, two brightly colored shapes meeting to form an edge will probably have a more colorful edge than two dull colored shapes. Only paint the color changes you actually see for yourself, and even then try not to overdo it. I know these ideas and observations can seem complicated, but we are talking about painting the real world.

I like color changes in edges, but I don't restrict myself to any one method to make edges. It doesn't make sense to avoid using other means that might suit my purpose better. Just remaining within a consistent technique is not enough reason. Instead, I look to my subject and how I wish to render it for clues about how to deal with an edge. I find it expedient to choose either gradations of color or blending, according to the effect I'm after. Often I'm able to combine both methods (as Sorolla did so well) by doing an edge first as tiny color changes, then merging them delicately with a single slow careful stroke with a clean brush. (Soft as a whisper, if you please), and I use a pliable sable or badger brush. The trick is to lay in the color changes with a minimum of paint (but never thinned) and resist the temptation to over-blend—one slow careful sleek brushstroke can do the job nicely.

Portraits and figure studies are especially rich in color changes on edges. They present splendid opportunities for combining broken color with blending. The pigmentation and semitransparent nature of human skin combine with light to create delicate (and surprising) tonalities when local colors change at the same point where anatomical forms turn. For example, there is often a sudden warming of color on the bridge of a nose as the form plunges into shadow. Often, a modest change in form alone will produce a color change. In north daylight, an edge can abruptly take on a blue tinge as it turns into the direction of the light. Such pearls are not to be wasted by ignoring them. I look for those opportunities and use them whenever I feel they are important to my painting. Unfortunately, the time restrictions inherent in Direct Painting seldom allow me to develop all the colors I see. However, the other effects that arise are well worth it.

BE SENSIBLE

Regardless of your medium or technique, don't get carried away with blended edges. Few things weaken a work more than indiscriminate blending. I am sure you have seen those dainty fan-shaped brushes called "blenders," usually made from sable, badger, or squirrel hair. They were used widely in the 19th century when blending was carried to absurd extremes in the fashionable Salon paintings. Blender brushes are not intended to be used as other brushes—to apply paint in a normal brushing motion. Rather, a blender is meant to be held perpendicular over adjacent areas of wet paint, and then lightly tapped up and down with a slight side to side motion. In this way tiny bits of paint are picked up on the delicate ends of the hairs and redeposited, creating a feathery soft edge as smooth as glass.

The use of a blender brush is handy to know, but I don't recommend it as a regular practice. My personal preference is to deliberately brandish the richness of paint by maintaining the bold freshness of my brushstrokes rather than peck at them with the blender. I like to do a "painterly" painting instead of something resembling a big glossy photograph.

Remember—soft edges in a painting are not an end in themselves. They must be *appropriately* soft and should conform to what you perceive them to be in your subject. This is what will make your edges look authentic. Arbitrarily softening everything is like intentionally mumbling when you speak.

YUKON WATERFALL

oil on canvas, 28 x 22

Alaska, 1992

It is difficult, if not impossible, to paint a waterfall successfully without an understanding of edges. A waterfall is movement, and movement means change, which, in turn, means an interplay of a range of hard and soft edges.

*The way a high-speed camera freezes action might be nice for catching the agony in a football halfback's face on impact, or a bullet shattering a melon, but it isn't the way we see things and it is definitely **not** a good way to follow if you wish to paint moving water convincingly.*

We humans cannot stop things that are flying in mid-air, and see them in perfect detail. Nor will it do to simply paint moving things as just a lot of fuzziness. If I had done that here, the waterfall would look like fog or cotton fluff or downy feathers going over a cliff.

It is none of those things; it is falling water, bouncing off rocks, and strewing into a variety of recurring patterns as it descends. It was up to me to study those various shapes and patterns with their characteristic edges, and then replicate them with paint.

*In striking contrast to the movement of the water, is the powerful **non-movement** of the massive rock formations. These called for a variety of harder edges and a sort of medley of edges where the rocks and water met. The trunks of the trees above called for harder edges as well, but not all of them. Trees disappearing into the forest required softer and darker edges as they joined together into the background.*



EDGES IN OTHER MEDIUMS

A well-executed watercolor is a genuine tour de force. I have nothing but humble admiration for anyone who can do it consistently and without compromising the subject to accommodate the demands of the medium. Controlling edges in watercolor can be tricky, even maddening (for me). Oil paint is duck soup by comparison. My nerves will stand up to doing only a few watercolors each year. (And they invariably end up looking like my oil paintings!)

In watercolor, the physical working surface of the paper is constantly fluctuating due to water absorption and evaporation. Consequently, the probability of accident is very high. A skillful watercolorist is one who knows how wet the paper is, which way the color is running, and how fast it will dry so it will stop in just the right spot. Nerves of steel and some luck are helpful.

I believe the real skill involved in watercolor painting lies in deliberately producing authentic edges while retaining the delicate transparent character of the medium. My experience with watercolor has taught me the right paper is one of the essential factors, because everything depends upon keeping the paint in a manipulative state for as long as possible. I recommend working with a paper that retains moisture and resists staining—one which allows for removal of colors without damaging its surface. "Hot or Hard Pressed" papers are best if you make many corrections.

Pastel offers no real impediments to creating edges. If anything, soft edges can happen too easily. Try to resist the impulse to habitually blend with your fingers. It can quickly lead to muddy color and a loss of the pastel "look." Once you have lost it, the only course is to start over with a fresh sheet of paper. The very nature of pastel allows for only a very limited amount of application before your paper loses its "tooth," and the crispness of the medium is lost. When it happens, the usual result is a downhill slide into a tediously overworked appearance. Like watercolor, the quality of the working surface is critical. If any one medium cries for the broken color approach, this is it. Get it right on the first try and leave it alone.

CREATING FRESH LOOKING EDGES IN A DRIED PAINTING

If it is necessary to work with edges (or anything else) on a painting already dry, and only minor touch-up work is needed, the easiest options to try first are **dry brush** or **scumbling** applications. Dry brush is **very lightly** dragging a loaded brush held at a low angle across your canvas. The idea is to deposit paint on the painting's textured surface **creating a ragged effect**, without covering it entirely. Scumbling is using a **lightly** loaded brush to gently scrub paint thinly across a surface, also without covering it entirely. If you are matching the color of any existing dried paint, remember, pigments darken slightly as they dry. This is most noticeable in lighter values where white is used, so mix your new paint slightly lighter.

GIVING A FLUID WET-INTO-WET LOOK TO LARGE WORKS

When doing work that needs a lot more than just touch-up, creating edges with the appearance of wet-in-wet on a dried or partially dried painting calls for special, but not particularly unusual, measures. Not all works can be completed in one unbroken session. Large works can take weeks or months, and most paintings (*alla prima* or not) can usually do with a bit of correction or fine tuning anyway, especially after you have shown your portrait of Aunt Tilly to the relatives and they pointed out that Tilly was never quite **that** cross-eyed.

When it is necessary to work into a dry picture and the target area is small, I like the shortcut of a light spray of retouch varnish, and then painting into the sprayed area while the varnish is still wet. If I am working on something larger that might take several days of working with the probability of drying in between, I do my finishing work as I go along and then use a palette knife to carefully and slowly scrape the edges of areas I wish to continue later (wiping my knife clean with each short stroke of the knife), leaving only a very thin paint layer where I leave off. Then I apply fresh paint to those scraped areas at the beginning of the next working session. That way I am always working into wet paint. Scraping also lets me avoid a troublesome buildup of paint.



WEDDING DRESS watercolor on paper, ss 17 x 20, 1994

I'm convinced this was how Sorolla, Zorn, and others were able to do their large works while still having them look as if they were done wet-into-wet. Many unfinished works (such as those I examined in Sorolla's Madrid studio) show this clearly. However, they all had occasion to repaint areas in pictures that had been finished for some time and thoroughly dried. For example, in Sargent's *Madame X*, Sorolla's *La Siesta*, and many landscapes by Monet, whole areas of their initially dried brushwork are still quite evident (revealing what they were trying to conceal), even where they have used thick overpainting. If you ever have a problem with dried, thickly textured brushstrokes you wish to overpaint, try scraping them flat with a **canvas scraper** (also called a **doctor blade**), or just use sandpaper (carefully). Learn from the Masters' mistakes! Get it right the first time!

FINAL TIPS

The vast majority of edges in any subject will fall into an intermediate range between razor hard and blurry softness. Keep this in mind as you work. In our ordinary everyday seeing we are not usually conscious of super-hard edges in our peripheral vision, which is why they seem unreal when simply scattered throughout a painting. We are aware of hard edges at or near the point we focus on. Paint the hard edges located at the borders of your subject less conspicuously. One safe way is to hold your strongest edge in reserve until you are dead sure you know where you want it. It's always comforting to have one final emergency shot for just the right moment.

However, if you do see the hard edge you want, and you need it in the early stages of a work, go for it and get it over with. When you do paint it, don't be shy. I like to lay it on with a palette knife or "loaded" brush (plenty of paint), and I do it with a very slow deliberate no-nonsense stroke. If it looks right, I don't go back and fool with it. If I fail to apply it the way I intended, I scrape it off and do it again. In any case, I do it in one stroke—but I do it very carefully. If I mess with it using additional strokes, I will weaken it.

Another safe tip—avoid painting thickly while you are manipulating edges. Paint is much easier to control in moderate to thin (but not thinned with medium) layers. Save the heavy stuff for later stages—after you have finished correcting and dealt with your difficult problems.

The optical and psychological effects of edges are fascinating. As your skill with them increases, your grasp of their elegance will become more sophisticated and demanding (in a good way because you will be seeing more possibilities). One of my more intriguing pursuits is to achieve an integration of edges throughout an entire painting—composing them in such a way they cooperate not only with the color harmony and value system, but also with my compositional motif to form an overall symmetry. It certainly can be done, and it occurs in painting more often than you might think. (Certain 19th- and 20th-century American painters such as Frank Duveneck, Elizabeth Sparhawk-Jones, Thomas Dewing, Howard Pyle, Bernard Fuchs, and Sherrie McGraw among others, all elevated it to a high art in the maturity of their careers. About the same time in Europe, superb edge techniques were also developed by Mancini in Italy, Degas in France, and Serov in Russia.)

This symmetry I seek is a hierarchy of edges working with the design elements within a painting. The aim is to generate dominant and subordinate edges that act to reinforce my compositional intent—forcing a viewer's concentration on a single focal point (without being vulgar of course). Mozart would certainly have tried for this if he had been a painter. Such an integration is the way we naturally see things anyway, yet it is anything but easy in painting. I have reached this goal in a few of my recent paintings, and come close in others. I mention this merely to whet your appetite should you become as captivated as I am by edges as expressive devices. However, I cannot expand on the idea here beyond simply mentioning it as something to be pursued, because I am still exploring the feasibility of it myself. Writing more will have to wait for a future book. Besides, what we have examined together here should keep you in good cheer.



THE ALTAR watercolor on paper, 18 x 25, St. Peter's Basilica, Rome, 1967

*Achieving edges in watercolor, or more specifically, **controlling** edges, is quite different in watercolor than it is in oil painting. There are two factors: the paper surface, and the degree of moisture in it. When I do a watercolor I use a very fine atomizer, similar to those used for perfume, to keep the areas on the paper I am working on fairly damp so the colors I apply will spread slightly to give the soft effects you see in the picture above. The caution here was not to overdo the soft edges too much and retain a nice balance between hard and soft edges.*



"I am black but comely...Behold, thou art fair; thou hast doves eyes...let me see thy countenance...Thy lips are like a thread of scarlet...

Thou art beautiful O my love...Thine head upon thee is Carmel, and the hair of thine head like purple...Thou art all fair, my love; there is no spot in thee."

—from The Song of Solomon

Apart from their metaphorical intent, these few excerpted words (forgive me) from the Bible demonstrate the remarkable power of color even used only as words. What images in our minds they create! Imagine the eloquent voice you have with a full, rich, palette, and your ability to use actual color!

Nature is the supreme colorist. She loves to play with it in every possible way, which is a good thing for us. Just imagine what it would be like if we were all the same color. What a dreary bore! (And what would all the bigots and racists do for their warped fun?) How splendid that Mother Nature has given us, her creatures, such extraordinary and diverse pigmentation. We should rejoice that we are each different. Each of us is one of her little color masterpieces.

How lucky we are as painters to have the tools to portray another soul... "fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and (beautiful) as an army with banners."

NANETTE oil on canvas, 25 x 21, 1987

CHAPTER SEVEN—COLOR AND LIGHT

Color is to seeing what flavor is to eating. It is by far the most sensuous element of the visual field, and for many artists, its allure is the sole reason to paint. Yet as remarkable as color is, many art students and accomplished painters alike claim it as their number one problem in working from life. (In my years of teaching and working with painters at all skill levels, however, I found drawing to be the greatest problem.) Whatever the case, "Getting the color right" is probably the source of more concern to artists than anything else in painting. Color, moreover, is more difficult to teach than all other technical aspects of painting. Why should this be so? What is it that makes working with color sometimes seem to be such an effort? (It needn't be, but let's assume for the moment that it is.) One answer is its behavior is not well enough understood even by experts to resolve it into a coherent and predictable system with a lot of rules and recipes for success. Some of the confusion stems from its very nature, especially its vast complexity, and the way we experience it. Other problems we may have with color are more or less self-inflicted, or to put it more accurately, were inflicted upon us as the result of various simplistic ideas about it we received as we were growing up (the socialization process).

GOOD NEWS

Smile now! The *actuality* of color is not about theoretical optics. It is an everyday real human experience! It is present in our dreams and waking hours. We are immersed in it the moment our eyes pop open each morning. Short of death, we cannot escape it, but even then no one knows for sure. Color is omnipresent, so much so most people probably take it for granted most of the time and fail to feel gratitude. Perhaps only those who have known color and suffered blindness understand what a loss a world devoid of color is. So, as you are squeezing out paint on your palette, pause for a moment and give thanks. Remember, even though it may sometimes be puzzling, more than enough *is* known about color to grasp it in a lucid way and use it to make beautiful paintings.

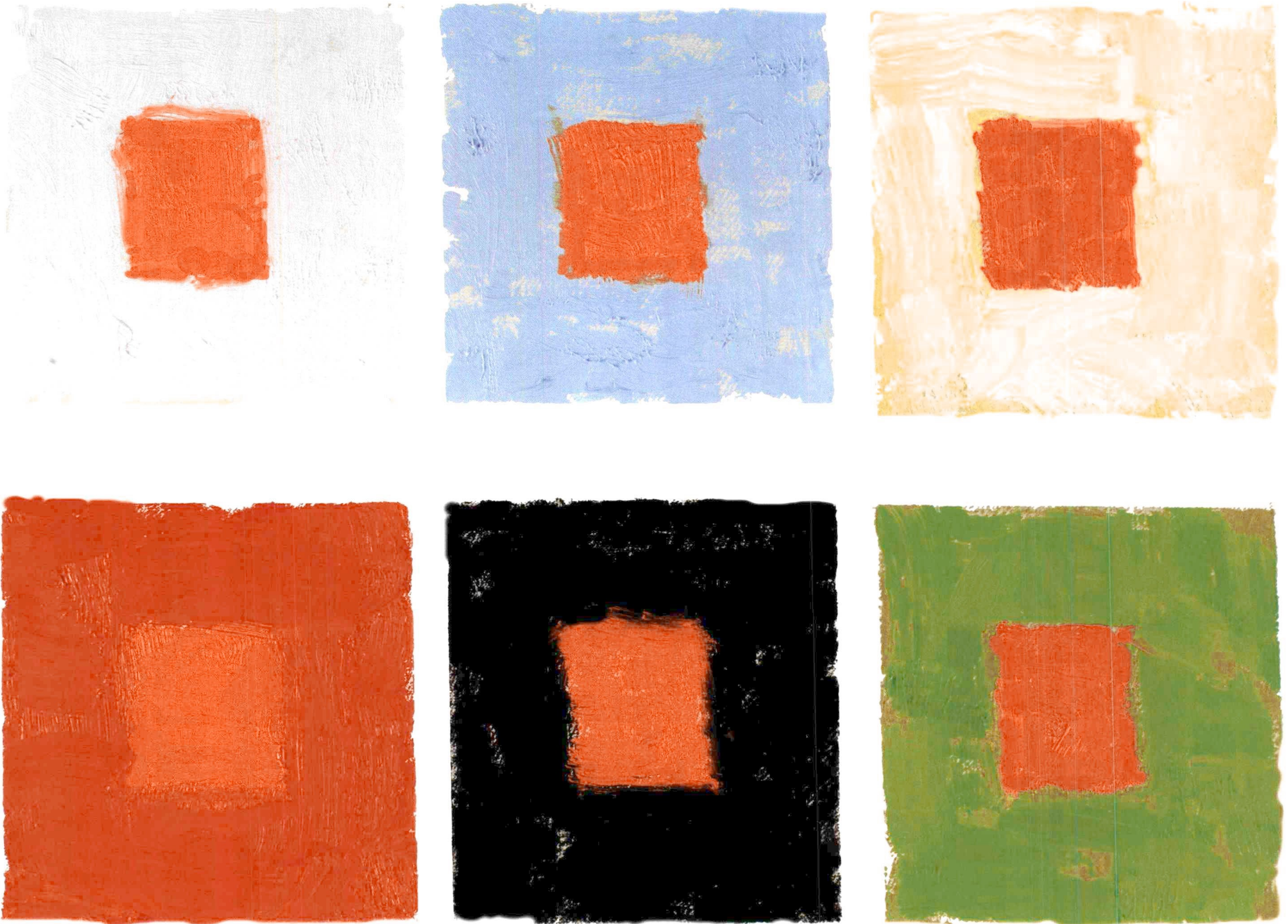
In this discussion, I outline what I know about the general characteristics of color, some underlying challenges, and then ways to enjoy it and make it sparkle in your paintings. Please read what I have to say in this first section carefully because it is extremely important to know, but don't be intimidated. What comes after is fascinating information along with some useful instruction.

THE COMPLEXITY OF COLOR

Consider the awesome number of colors and color combinations around us. Researchers claim the human eye can detect at least ten million hues. (I wonder who counted them.) And *that* is only a fraction of the spectrum! Who knows, if we humans continue to evolve, our human eyes may someday see in the infrared and ultraviolet ranges. God was indeed lavish when She created light and color. Fortunately, most of our paintings involve surprisingly few of those millions of colors, perhaps a few hundred at most, but that is still a lot—more than enough to contend with when the goal is to get each one "right."

LOCAL COLORS

Local color is the term for the color references used in ordinary conversation. We speak of the *red* of red roses, the *greens* in green grass, blue eyes, yellow wheat, purple dress, black hat, orange pumpkin, and so on. These are the colors of things caused by their *Pigmentation*. Pigment particles are microscopic size substances that absorb certain wavelengths of light and reflect others. Also, there is a certain lack of pigmentation to contend with in various transparent substances such as glass, water, clouds, and the earth's atmosphere, causing them to take on the colors of other sources. Transparent matter acts optically, often behaving as a prism, a lens, a mirror, a filter, or a combination of those things, in producing color effects.



The six squares of color combinations above demonstrate clearly the influence of surrounding colors on any given color. The given color in the small squares is a mixture of Cadmium Orange and Cadmium Yellow Deep. That color is exactly the same for all the center patches in the squares. Not only do the small orange squares appear different in value from one image to the next, but some also seem to be different hues of orange, particularly in the bottom row. Note that the stronger the surrounding color, the more it influences the center orange color. If these six examples were to be seen under a significantly warmer or cooler light, all the colors would look different than they do now.

THE RELATIVITY OF COLOR

A more enchanting and most profound property of color is its RELATIVITY, the fact that a color can appear different under different circumstances. The color of something looks the way it does because of **TWO** variables, each influencing the other like a very complex but interesting ménage à trois. They are:

(1) THE INFLUENCE OF SURROUNDING COLORS: For example, the color of your face appears different when you wear a green shirt than when you wear a red one. White surrounded by black looks brighter than white surrounded by light gray. Gray looks cooler against a red background than against a dark blue one, and so on. **No color can exist alone.** It is **always** seen on a surrounding background of one or more colors, and those colors make the color in question look the way it does.

(2) THE AMBIENT LIGHT ILLUMINATING A SUBJECT: You look different in sunlight than in artificial light, or overcast light, or firelight. (Under Mercury or Sodium Vapor street lighting you'll look like you're dead.)

PLEASE REMEMBER THIS—THE COLOR OF ANYTHING CHANGES ITS APPEARANCE (WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE) WHEN EITHER THE **LIGHT** CHANGES, OR ITS SURROUNDING **COLORS** CHANGE. (See facing page.)

In this way, colors seem to behave as mischievously as those impish particles in Quantum Physics—even the way you **look** at them seems to make them change. Colors are slippery devils indeed, with a logic all their own and a definite reluctance to be pinned down or precisely systematized. (Ah yes, but they're not **smarter** than we are!)

THE LIMITATIONS OF LANGUAGE IN DESCRIBING COLOR

Our color perception is a very intricate mix of pure sensation and emotional response, which is why trying to describe our individual (subjective) experience of it using only words is difficult (but not impossibly so). Color technicians don't even bother with words anymore. They use numbers instead. Nice for them I guess, but calling Cadmium Orange ED872d-R93-G53-B18 is more than I can deal with at my stage in life. Also I'm not about to tell my Nancy when I kiss her in the morning that her lips are very R100-G41-B71 today. So you see, talking or writing about color can sometimes be as risky as trying to pin down other sensations, such as flavors, smells, lyrical sounds, or being in love. Art can often be the only way to express such things, but learning it isn't always easy. The subtlety and range of our senses and feelings are so great that when we speak or write about them we soon run out of nouns and adjectives. Our visual experiences often far exceed the descriptive capacity of verbal language. Imagine trying to describe or differentiate those ten million hues I mentioned! So bear with me as I occasionally grope for words in this examination of color.

THE SUBJECTIVE NATURE OF COLOR PERCEPTION

Because we experience colors as mental perceptions, they can often trigger elaborate memory associations, causing us to respond to them in curiously subjective ways. Some of our color affinities are so deeply internalized, they emerge as strong emotions. In this respect colors often resemble smells. The same color (or fragrance) can stimulate different things in different people. Blue might be scary to me but pleasantly exciting to you. White may mean purity and cleanliness to some, but it might evoke the desolation of winter in others. Colors do not in themselves **cause** specific psychological associations. We do. We create those feelings in our minds because we experience color through the filter of our individual life experiences. Perfect sanity does not exist, at least not in everyone else.

Cultural notions also influence our color preferences. Red, for example, is quite nice on a lady's lips but not on her nose (at least not in today's society). In Victorian times it was fashionable for ladies to put Rouge on their ears, not their cheeks, which is one reason why Madam Gautreau's ear looks so pink in Sargent's painting, *Madame X*. I can't imagine a woman like her actually blushing, but then who knows? She also powdered the rest of her skin a whitish color, which exaggerated the effect of her scarlet ears. We prefer our milk white, not black, and our blood red instead of green—unless of course you happen to be a Martian or a highly privileged person, which in the latter case having blue blood is OK. We like our majestic mountains to be purple, our waves of grain amber, and our cowards yellow. Many other twisted color notions, as we know, take on stupidly horrible dimensions in the form of racism and racial profiling.

The colors of things and the biases we bring to those colors have much to do with even our artistic choices. Often I have heard painters say they saw the right color but didn't use it because they didn't *like* it. More commonly, painters have a favorite color on their palette that they use throughout a painting whether or not the color is present in the subject. Still others have preferred combinations of colors they repeatedly use simply because they "worked" well in past paintings.

There is also some evidence that perception of color among people with "normal" vision varies somewhat. (I do not mean actual color blindness.) Some individuals, for instance, seem to see their visual field as being overall greener or more blue than others. You can see this color shift clearly in the works of competent painters when they paint the same subject under the same light at the same time. Four well-known examples are identical subjects painted by Renoir and Monet: *La Grenouillère* (1869), and *Sailboats at Argenteuil* (1873). Monet's works were more blue-violet than Renoir's. Both, however, are "true" within their respective harmonies. Their paintings seem "correct" compared to one another because their color temperature relationships are identical, even though they are not precisely alike in actual color. Whether this is a physiological curiosity or a simple predilection for certain colors, I do not know, but it is certainly nothing to worry about. If you happen to be of the blue persuasion, just don't get into an argument with someone who sees everything greener. Monet and Renoir managed very well and remained friends.

It is clear how our personal attraction-aversion response to certain colors can sometimes frustrate accurate perception. Imagine trying to paint snow if white gives you the creeps, or if the subtle colors in snow are ignored because snow carries a white only label! More familiar is the complaint about painting summer landscapes that "everything is too green," or everything is the same green. This of course is not true. It's ridiculous. Summer landscapes, as all other landscapes, contain every color in the rainbow. Painters who make such an objection are either not noticing the wealth of colors, or simply revealing their aversion to green.

Much more untidy though is our acquired notion about hot and cold (or warm and cool) colors. These terms describe the technical *temperature* relationships between colors. It is a mistaken notion that a specific color has an *intrinsic* temperature—such as blue always being cold and orange always warm. *Compared* to one another they are, but *not in themselves*. It is not always easy to make such a distinction. Try comparing orange, red, and yellow to one another—which is warmer? Which is cooler? And by how much? See the problem? (As you read further, the subtleties of color temperature will be examined much more thoroughly.)

The point of all we have been discussing about perception is this: as painters we must get past our common preconceptions about color and realize when we paint we are working in an arena of *relativity* where the appearance of colors (their identity, and how they look), changes from one situation to the next. The change happens mainly when the light source changes from one situation to another, such as going from bright sunshine to a cloudy day (as an extreme example). The "look" of a color also changes when other colors in a subject change. For example, the ear on Sargent's *Madame X* would look quite different if Madame Gautreau had worn a *white* dress with a hot pink background instead of the sexy black dress and the drab background.



RED AND WHITE AZALEAS oil on canvas, 22 x 28, 1987



APRIL PANSIES AND RHODODENDRON LEAVES oil on canvas, 12 x 14, 2012

This is what I think of as a yum-yum painting, meaning the bright colors look good enough to eat, like candies in a box. Look at all the colors in the greens too! The brilliant display of color above was produced by applying nearly every bright color with a single stroke of my palette knife, and then not going over the stroke a second time. The way paint is applied can be critical to color purity and strength. The palette knife is ideal when the brightest possible colors are needed. Proficiency with the knife takes practice, but when you get good at it, the knife can be one of the finest tools in your repertoire of techniques. Single palette knife strokes are rarely perfect on all sides of a stroke. I find I usually have to modify or correct the edge with an adjacent color to make it the right shape, but I never fool with the main body of the stroke itself.

THOUGHTS ON THE NEW PIGMENTS

If artists from any period in the past could rise from their graves and travel through time to a large art supply store in the United States today, they would probably think they had at last arrived in a painter's heaven. If I happened to be in the store at the time, I'm not quite sure what I would do, or say, or even understand, what with all those old guys excited out of their wits!

We are blessed today with a selection of high quality materials unmatched in history—paints and brushes which would have sent the old Masters into deliriums of joy. Modern paint chemistry has given us so very much to choose from, yet not quite *all* the colors we would *like* to have, at least not as absolutely permanent stable pigments. Except for one tiny exception, I'm pretty happy with the pigments I have to work with. This minor empty space on my palette is the lack of a pure transparent yellow. Some yellows are marketed as transparent by the manufacturers, but they are actually only *translucent* suspensions of opaque or semi-opaque pigments. None are truly transparent in the same way such things as amber, olive oil, or vintage Rhine wines are.

The issue of yellow aside, I welcome the new pigments. The only problem I have is the acute embarrassment I feel asking for them in art stores when I try pronouncing their names. Words like isoviollanthrone, thioindigold, indanthrene, quinacridone, benzimidazolone, dinitraniline, and isoindoline to name only a few, are far more than I can manage without the danger of my tongue falling off, or the salesgirl laughing herself silly.

To me the names for new artists' colors sound more like medicines for chronic skin diseases. Perhaps with age I'm just getting old fashioned, but the palette pigments I use (page 212) were perfected long before I was born. I know all about them. They have served me well since I was a young student, and most of the works I completed with them more than sixty years ago are still as fresh as the day they were painted. That said, I also enjoy trying out some of the new more saturated versions of the primary and secondary colors. Many of them are indeed quite brilliant and strong (a little can go a long way). For me, it's like tasting new candy, but in the end, it's all still just sugar. Some are rated more stable and permanent than others, so stick with the recommended ones, and bear in mind conservators measure permanence in centuries. They do not rely upon accelerated light tests to rate permanence, as manufacturers do for their marketing.

If you're anything like me and you want to know exactly what your paint is made of, how it is made, how to apply it properly for permanence, how to read the labels on paint tubes so you know what you're buying, what paints *never* to use, and what you can believe about what manufacturers say to sell their products, two books should be *required* reading for you: *The Artist's Handbook of Materials and Techniques* by Ralph Mayer, and *The Artist's Guide to Selecting Colors*, by Michael Wilcox. For more details see the Recommended Reading section at the end of this book.

One final point: using the latest state-of-the-art red or blue or green or whatever pigments, is not going to make your pictures look any better if you do not also have a practical knowledge of the characteristics and use of color itself. It is how *you* understand color and how *you* use it that matters.



THE LIMITATIONS OF PIGMENT

Although we have a rich selection of pigments to choose from, we cannot hope to match the full range of values and colors we normally see in various subjects. This is because Mother Nature creates colors in a variety of ways, mostly by using light itself as her palette, but paint can only produce color one way—by selectively *reflecting* light. *Selective* reflection means all pigments reflect certain wavelengths of light and absorb others. The two exceptions are white and black. Pure white pigment reflects *all* wavelengths of light, which is why it looks white. On the other hand, pure black pigments *absorb* all light and color, so we see nothing, and we call it blackness. The resulting contrast on this page is the reason why you can read my words—while the ink is busy absorbing light, this paper is reflecting light. If the situation were reversed, the paper would look black and the words would be white.

Interesting isn't it, when we speak of pigmentation we normally think of color as actually *being* something, like the red on an apple for example, when in fact red is simply the *absence* of blue and yellow! Likewise, yellow is the absence of blue and red; blue lacks red and yellow; orange is red and yellow but no blue; green is blue and yellow but no red, and so on. If you wanted to have fun with words, you could say then: *all colors are what they are, but on the other hand they are also what they are not!*

While the full extent of brightness and color hues in creation is beyond our palette pigments, we can nevertheless produce astonishing versions of what we see, because the kind of painting I am dealing with in this book is not about literally duplicating the real world. *It is about painting our own personal visual experience of the world.* To accomplish this we have many ways to express the *effects* of light and color even though we can only occasionally duplicate the *actual* intensity of light and saturation of colors. Some trompe l'oeil painters such as William Harnett (1848-1892) managed this amazingly.

And by the way, I am not referring here to interpretive art or stylization, where artists change what they literally see in order to have it conform to a certain personal manner of painting. That is another branch of art entirely.

Our materials have a few other characteristics we must accept. Oil paint is smelly to some (it's fragrant to me). It is also a naturally shiny substance, which is why it produces the richest colors and deep values. The same luster can often produce disconcerting glare in working or viewing. Acrylic is nice for those who don't like turpentine and other solvents, but it lacks the textural possibilities and classic look of oils. Watercolors dry with a matte surface and lose a certain richness in the dark colors. Also there is a general belief (bloody unfair too) that water media are not as serious or as valuable as oils. Pastel has the same problem; so does egg tempera, casein, gouache, and so on.

Every medium has drawbacks and hindrances, just as each has superb qualities and strengths. It is up to us to understand the materials and tools we use and know what we can and cannot do with them. For all practical purposes, however, the reliable colors we *do* have are quite enough for almost any artistic statement, because the success or failure of a work *does not* rely upon precisely duplicating nature, nor does it depend on the quality of our materials. Only our aesthetic vision and skills matter. Back in art school, we (students) liked to complain about our materials (convenient diversions from our struggles with learning). Bill Mosby would point out to us that if Michelangelo had possessed only a broom and a bucket of mud, he could still have painted the Sistine Chapel ceiling, and it would have been just as much of a masterpiece! The Pope might not have approved though.





Hobb Green Breakfast oil on canvas, 10 x 18, Yorkshire, England, 1994

Nancy is shown here in 1994 at the Hobb Green, a Manor house and estate located in Yorkshire, England (now a Bed and Breakfast). As gracious as our hosts were, I could not bring myself to ask permission to actually paint in their dining room, so this was done from a photograph. Fortunately, I had painted Nancy and others often from life in similar settings, which made it fairly easy to extrapolate colors missing in the photo. Most of those were in the extremely dark and light areas. The middle tones usually came through quite well when I was using color film.

It was helpful too, knowing that the light was cool (it was a bright overcast morning). Therefore, as long as I kept my darks progressively warmer than the light areas, I was safe regarding color temperature. Since the window was the only source of light, there was a single direction of light, which also made things easier.

I find paintings such as these studies from photos are, on average, best as small paintings rather than larger ones, because in enlarging an image, whether it is digital or from film, there is only enough useful color information up to a certain point. Beyond that point, my experience has been that there are not enough subtle color changes to do a canvas larger than 16 x 20 inches satisfactorily.



SALMON TRAWLERS oil on canvas, 8 x 12, Dingle Bay, Ireland, 1994

I love to paint rainy, snowy, and foggy situations. Because of the pervasive moisture in the air, atmospheric effects such as these provide ready-made color harmonies. Tiny water droplets or flakes act as little prisms reflecting and repeating all of the light and color in a scene, supersaturating it with a single dominant note (Cobalt Blue in this case). The only problem was tactical: how to manage the weather. Painting in the rain isn't so bad if you are inside warm and dry—which I was here. This is one of several waterfront sketches I completed at Dingle Bay, Ireland, in 1994. Nancy and I have various strategies to deal with weather on our travels; all of them involve getting in or under something to keep the canvas and palette dry. (We wear rain gear too.) For this sketch, I drove to the wharf edge at the little port of Dingle, and painted in the front seat of our small car with my canvas propped up on the steering wheel—quite a trick for someone my size.

MISINFORMATION SPECIFIC TO COLOR

In spite of the plethora of color "systems" on hand, no one has yet been able to come up with a comprehensive color "law" that always meets the demands of working from life. Most of the lesser "rules" and many of the misguided notions that have come down to us do not stand up very well either. Here are a few examples of the more familiar fallacies and oddities.

- You have all heard the saying about warm colors "advancing" and cool colors "receding" in landscape painting—*that* is simply false, so don't believe it. There are no such constants in nature. *Sometimes* colors appear cooler with distance, *but not always*.
- Equally wrong is the idea of certain colors naturally "going together," or that others "clash." Such notions are simply personal opinions formed by fads or flawed theories of harmony. **Color harmonies, pleasing to us or not, are created by ambient light, or a combination of lights from natural or man-made sources, acting alone or together, with local pigmentation in subjects or scenes before us—nothing more.** I have much more to offer about color harmony ahead as you read on.
- The idea that a color can be "neutralized" by mixing it with its complement is not true either, because there is no such thing as a neutral color. For example, mixing green into red, or adding purple to yellow does not neutralize the red or yellow, it just changes them into a different red or yellow.
- Avoid schemes offering methods or systems or procedures for creating color harmonies or specific natural effects (like how to paint the color of water, or flowers, or rainy Paris street scenes). They might produce results under certain circumstances, but not in working from life. Nature has given us no such formulas, only a few principles. A good example is the proven observation about clear blue skies: what seems to be a blue sky at first glance is actually composed of all the colors of the rainbow, from a warm Ultramarine Blue at its zenith, down through cooler blues, blue-greens, yellow-greens, and finally dusky reds at the horizon. Be wary as well if anyone claims to have a simple cure for your color problems, or offers a theory which if followed will *always* produce "great" color no matter what.
- Some day (perhaps after I have departed to the great studio in the sky), but alas, probably sooner than we expect or want, you will be able to point your mobile phone, or some other digital gadget, at your subject and it will tell you what colors to mix. (Similar analyzers have been in use for some time in hardware and paint stores.) Until such time arrives you can fool around with any of a number of color "aids" available from your favorite art store or on the Internet. These aids, some small enough to fit in your pocket, are usually circular plastic or cardboard displays printed with small rectangles of primary and secondary colors. They come with discs you can turn, and little window displays which show what happens when you mix one color with another. Other color wheels show you how to create various types of color harmonies or how to match colors. Still other gadgets are intended to be held up to a subject to supposedly show what its values are. I have not checked, but I'm sure these applications are also on your mobile device.

My suggestion is to ignore such things. Such things might possibly be useful for children in a classroom setting, but for serious use in helping anyone paint from life, they are completely without value. Why? Because as I pointed out earlier in this chapter, the very *essence* of color lies in its *relativity*. Colors are so completely dependent upon one another and the light upon them for their appearance (how they look to us), that they are beyond any conceivable systematizing or codification. Even the highly regarded Munsell Color System, so widely employed in industry and printing, is useless to an artist working from life. This is because that system cannot provide for the relativistic nature of color as a human experience. No chart, color wheel, mixing guide, harmony scheme, numerical color selector, or electronic color matching device can *ever* hope to match the sensitivity, range, and above all, the judgment, of the eye and mind capability of a painter who has mastered the skills of working from life.

- There is also a popular idea that nature has to be "helped." Some believe her colors or formations and designs need to be altered to comply with an ideal of what is compositionally acceptable or aesthetically pleasing. That is absurd. Like it or not, Nature per se is perfect, but not all of us see or respond in the same way to the sumptuous banquet she offers. My personal approach is always to look within myself to find *what* drew me to my subject and *why* it did, rather than change what is before me to conform to what I am sure will be pleasing, or make my picture sell faster. In my view, capturing the look of authenticity, painting the way a subject really appears to me, is the way to go. This is the reason why, for example, in a still life of flowers, I give as much attention to dead leaves and blossoms as I do healthy ones. It is also the reason I prefer to do flowers in a garden or forest rather than indoors. Outside in a natural environment they are subject to the effects of nature, and thus take on a character entirely missing in florist-grown preened and pruned flowers.

- There are no "beautiful" or "ugly" colors either. Colors are just colors. Beauty and ugliness are merely flawed concepts drilled into us as we grow up and experience the big complicated world. It is a major part of what is called the socialization process, the means by which we become slowly civilized as we grow up. The beautiful-or-ugly nonsense part goes like this: figuratively speaking, all things as we encounter them for the first time come with invisible little tags attached to them—flowers are pretty, leaves are ordinary, dead leaves are ugly, spiders are horrible, so are snakes, sunsets are gorgeous, cloudy days are ordinary, roast turkey is beautiful, a slaughtered hog is repulsive—you see where I'm going with this.

Society, through our culture, neatly classifies everything in the whole world for us into three broad categories: the beautiful (or good), the ordinary or common (not particularly interesting), and the ugly (or bad). When it comes down to colors, we will have come by a certain age to believe some to be beautiful, some to be boring, and the rest to be ugly or inconsequential. As artists we learn (I hope) such adjectives are nothing more than useless value judgments which merely describe our naïve feelings about colors, not their intrinsic properties. The words beauty and ugly have no meaning when we paint.

- All the other common adjectives applied to specific colors, such as exciting, somber, mellow, sensuous, gay, deathly, bold, sexy, mellow, masculine, feminine, amusing, soothing, banal, and so on, have no valid meaning either. They too refer only to our feelings. The words *chalky* or *muddy*, however, are familiar terms artists use when they are unhappy with certain colors in their paintings. As it invariably turns out, they are in fact describing colors as simply mixtures which are the inappropriate relative temperature for the area in which they are placed.

- The commercial cliché names given to many colors are worthless—Rose Red, Canary Yellow, Fuchsia, Mauve, Beige, Elephant Gray, Wild Cherry, Spanked Baby Pink, Olive Drab, Funereal Black—all are just silly. However, the familiar names for artists' pigments, such as Cobalt Blue, Cadmium Red, and Terra Rosa, for example, are functional since they are manufacturers' standards by which we identify specific pigments. (At least they are supposed to be—some pigments, such as Yellow Ochre, Viridian, and the Cadmiums vary widely in hue from one brand to another.)

- Lastly and obviously quite important: *beware of the mystique of color!* This is the insidious notion you either have a "color sense" or you do not. I'm not sure just what is meant by a color sense. Perhaps it is supposed to be something imparted by one's DNA, or it's like having the ability to levitate. Who knows? It doesn't really matter because such ideas are merely make-believe notions from our folklore. Watch out too for the foolish belief about color being too complex to ever master (like the average person's attitude toward rocket science). It isn't. Even worse is the often helpless feeling that color doesn't make any sense at all. Color is one of Creation's nicer ideas. It is there for us to savor, and explore, and share. It has a beautiful order which anyone willing to make the effort can master. Trust me on this.



TRALEE CHOCOLATE SHOP oil on panel, 8 x 12, Ireland, 1994

This is another example of how water can act to unify the color in a location—the wetness everywhere reflecting colors endlessly, creating a Cadmium Red harmony. Please note, the primary and secondary colors—red, yellow, blue, green, orange, and violet—are all present, but only red, yellow, and orange, appear in a pure state. Yellow and orange stand out because they represent light sources within the shop, and are independent of the otherwise cooler dominant outdoor natural light. My set-up was across the street under an awning, and Nancy obliged me by posing briefly and rather demurely with her umbrella as the lovely Rose of Tralee in the rain.

There are many more delusions out there in the land of art, but I'm sure you see my point. We do not understand color beyond certain basic ideas and proven facts, so we must be wary of quaint beliefs, fears, and expedient little rules that may have arisen under particular circumstances, but cannot be applied generally. Given this enigma about color—its complex power and seeming elusiveness, then add to it the dubious theories, misinformation, cultural whims, and downright ignorance about it, and it is no wonder some find it hard to grasp. Thou shalt not despair though, you're in good hands here. Read on.

THE GOOD NEWS!

Take a deep breath now! The bad part is over! We have mucked around long enough in negatives. I give you now some very cheery things to think about. For starters, I believe color should be great fun! Remember that and never be afraid of color. To me it would be like being afraid of strawberries and whipped cream. There is no reason at all to think of color as intimidating. It has surrounded you all of your life, and you should embrace it joyfully. Color is part of who and what you are. The things I have described above are not worth getting nervous about. Just be aware of them.

You *can* acquire a sound and useful understanding of color. After all, quite a few artists have mastered its ways and their works are glorious lessons in seeing and painting it. As far as I know, there is no evidence they were especially singled out by the Creator, nor endowed with a unique color perception gene you do not also have (if there is one). You already understand many complex natural phenomena, at least to the extent you use them effectively in everyday life, things like gravity, electricity, love, intelligence, memory, to name only a few. Color is just another one, and it is there for you to explore and enjoy.

In addition to giving us their paintings, some of the Masters had the generosity of spirit to share their priceless knowledge by teaching. In the United States for example: Howard Pyle, Robert Henri, Cecilia Beaux, Thomas Eakins, William Merritt Chase, John Twachtman, Frank Vincent DuMond, George Bridgman, and Frank Duveneck, and so many others from a very long list.

Today we also have hundreds (perhaps more) of instructional books and videos on all aspects of art written by accomplished living artists, many quite young, who have embraced the same spirit of sharing as the painters I mentioned above. I am always moved when I realize what they are willing to do to share their knowledge and personal methods with others. I see this same sharing on the Internet, with thousands of artists from across the world enthusiastically exchanging news, ideas, and discoveries about art.

So, in spite of the modern movement of the 20th century, which unfortunately discouraged known skills and sophisticated technology, we still know many valuable things, and we have a body of very useful and savvy knowledge to guide us, though it is not gathered in one book or school. We also have a limited (but effective enough) technical language to describe the properties and qualities of color, as well as many of its behavioral quirks. Despite the subjective character of color and the problems of description, many things about it are not purely subjective, and they can be described and articulated rationally. There is far more common sense about color than mystery.

WHAT I KNOW FOR SURE ABOUT COLOR

I know this simple fact—when painting from life, all I have to do is correctly identify a color I see in my subject as a specific pigment or mixture of pigments, and then put it on my canvas in the right place. Nothing more. ***See it right, mix what I see right, and then stick it where it belongs.*** The rest of what I know is about how to do that, which is what the remainder of this chapter is about. I begin with some general remarks about color and light, and then explore the specifics of seeing color in a discerning way and matching what I see with appropriate pigment mixtures. "Sticking it in the right place" comes under the heading of Drawing From Life (Chapter Four). I go into various ways of applying paint to get the most out of color and overcome some of its limitations. I also describe how to explore and understand a palette of colors, and then use the knowledge to help see the patches of color on a subject as simple mixtures. I must also mention that I will be dealing with COLOR TEMPERATURE in all sections because it permeates every aspect of this subject.



DOLLS oil on canvas, 18 x 24, 1987

The painting above is one of the first of several doll paintings I would do over years. I was fortunate here to have some very distinctive dolls and other objects to work with. I spent as much time seeking out and arranging the things in this picture as I did doing the actual painting. It was this picture, or rather in preparing the set-up for this picture, when I realized a very important principle in still life painting. It was simply this: in every respect, still life painting offers more freedom than any other area of painting, because the artist can select everything to be painted and arrange the things in any way she or he pleases. If something doesn't feel quite right, it can be rearranged, altered or eliminated. Everything about a still life can be precisely what an artist wishes. If at any point in the course of doing the painting there is a change of heart, the change can be made in the still life or in the painting, whichever works best.

NOTE: Before I get into the details about what to mix with what to get such and so, please give some attention to the remainder of this section so you will be familiar with the way light creates color, how colors influence other colors, and why it all behaves the way it does. Remember how earlier in this chapter I briefly outlined color as a consequence of either direct light or reflected light, and local pigmentation. In the coming pages you will find much more about the role of light in producing color. Understanding how that works will help you achieve some welcome color effects, and perhaps spare you from trying the impossible.

COLOR AND LIGHT

The first time I saw color television I could hardly believe my eyes. It was the 1950s, I was an art student, and color TV was just coming onto the American market. Our family couldn't afford one, so I had to go to the science museum in Chicago to see what one looked like. The images I saw on the small television screen then were crude up close, but *fascinating*—like small Pointillist paintings (in motion no less)—but far more brilliant. I was stunned how electronic technology could so easily create the intensity and purity of color I had been trying so unsuccessfully to obtain with my paints (remember I was just a student). And it was all done with the press of a button. It was humiliating (and scary) to see color skills wrenched from my sacred domain by a gang of what I considered to be nerdy technicians. I was jealous, but I was also learning something important. That day in the science museum when I witnessed light creating color, I was transported to my eventual understanding of the entire visual world.

In time of course, I realized as amazing as it was, TV was just another artificial view of reality. It could not reproduce the way things really looked to my eyes, which was my aim as a painter. Electronics and photography could only provide images they were designed to record, and TV can't do anything at all when the plug is pulled. I wanted to replicate what *I* see.

Remembering the words of Sun Tzu, "*Know thine enemy*," I looked into the matter and learned color television was created with *light* instead of pigments, and that I could never match electronic color with my paints no matter what I did. Why? Because what I was seeing on the screen was an illusion created with tiny bits of phosphorescence (light sources), which is not possible to achieve with paint. Electronic monitors, however, do it at a cost which comes in the form of a loss of authentic values and hues. Another discovery was about the limited range of colors and values inherent in electronic propagation. On the positive side I learned the use of colored light, instead of pigments, to produce images is called "additive color" because the hues are created by *adding* primary colors of light to one another. (Motion pictures and projected photography do essentially the same thing.)

We do something completely different in painting. We use pigments—which merely *reflect* light. The paints we use absorb (subtract) certain wavelengths of the light they receive, and reflect others. Pure red paint, for example, looks "red" because it absorbs all light rays except those in the red portion of the electromagnetic spectrum. Green paint reflects blue and yellow light, and absorbs red light. Because of this, the colors we work with on our palettes are called *subtractive colors*.

And so the first lesson from my encounter with the wonders of television was about the big difference between creating images with light and painting pictures with pigments.

My second lesson was about what *could* and *could not* be done with my paints, which was definitely a reality trip. I learned that even though I could not duplicate light itself, I nevertheless had to deal with sources of light in my subjects, such as street lights in a city scene, or lamp lights in an interior. Many of the things I attempted to paint consisted of colors that were the result of *both* additive and subtractive effects. In other words, my subjects, whether they were city streets, landscapes, or illuminated figures in a room, often were combinations of both light sources and reflected light. In a typical landscape, the sky, glowing with diffracted sunlight, was a light *source*, and almost everything on the ground was *reflected* light. Naturally, I couldn't make my paint glow like a flashlight, so there had to be another way—and THERE WAS!



SUSAN oil on canvas, 20 x 24, 1970

FIRST SOME DEFINITIONS

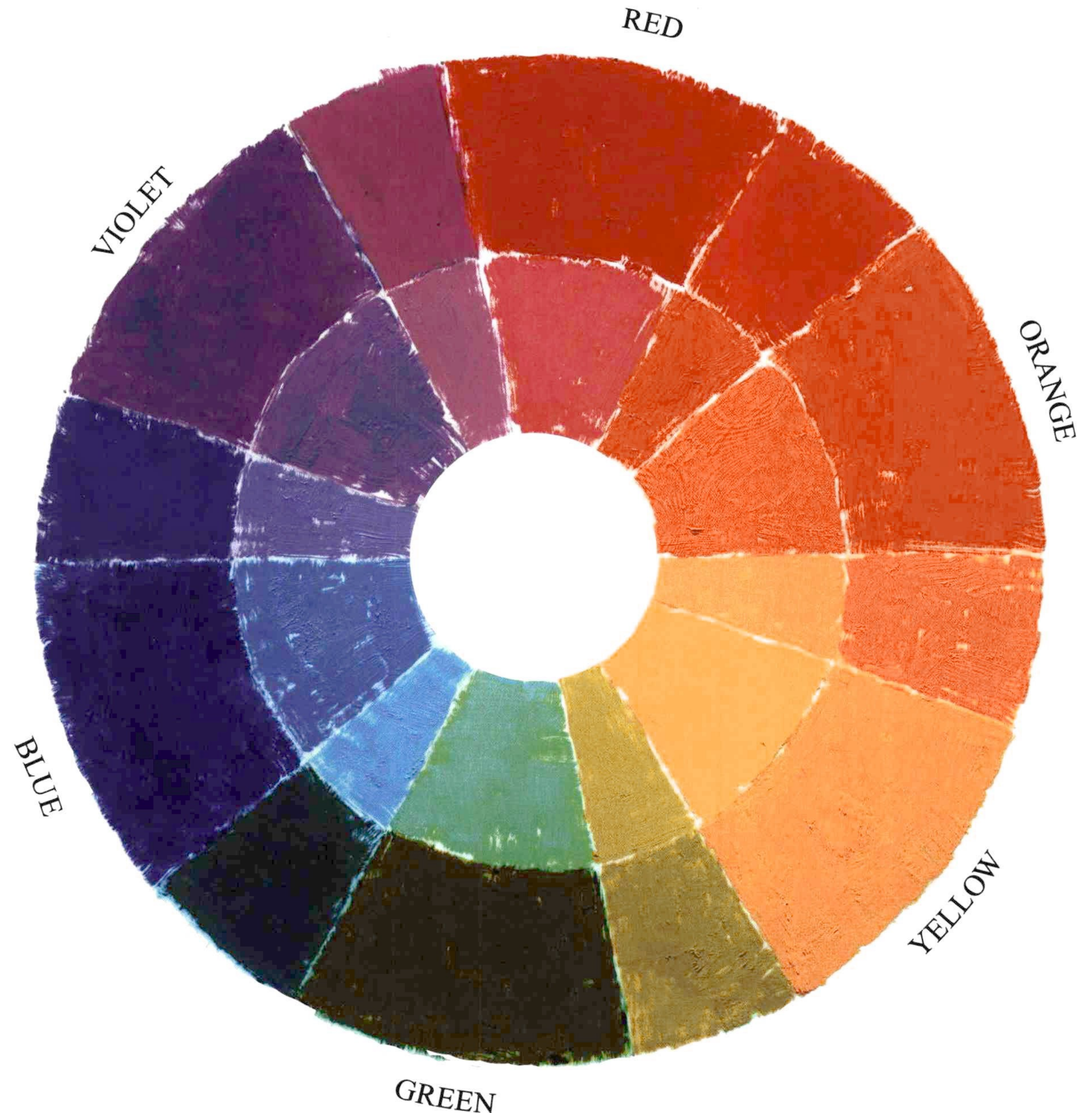
For clarity, here is a short list of color terms (in **bold**) I use in this discussion:

- The **Three Primary Colors** of artists' pigments are **Red**, **Yellow**, and **Blue**. They are called primary because *all* other colors are created by some combination of them. It follows that no combination of colors can produce a primary color. They are as primal as the elements in chemistry or the four forces in physics.
- The **Secondary Colors** are **Green**, **Orange**, and **Violet**. They are called secondary because each is a mixture of any two of the primary colors.
- The **Tertiary Colors** are various combinations of all three primary colors—the Browns and Gray-Browns.
- A **Complementary Color** is usually thought of as the color opposite another on the color wheel, which it indeed is (page opposite). Technically speaking, the complement of a color is the color that transforms it into a Tertiary Color. Confusing? Here it is in plain words using the primary color Red as an example:
 1. The complement of red is green. OK so far.
 2. Green is a mixture of yellow and blue.
 3. Therefore, when we add *green* to *red*, we get our old primary friends, **red, yellow and blue again!**
 4. We now have our *three primaries mixed together*. In other words we have a **Tertiary color! What a trick!**

By the way, this is the origin of a widely taught belief that a color can be "neutralized" by adding its complement. Perhaps I am just mincing words, but in my almost seventy years of painting, I have yet to see a "neutral" color. Adding a complement makes a *new* color, that's all. Incidentally, the word *complement* should not be confused with *compliment*, which is a word of praise. Complement means **completion**, as in *a full complement of soldiers, or teeth*. A Tertiary mixture is a full complement of all three primary colors.

5. The words **Saturation**, **Intensity**, **Pure** or **Purity**, and **Richness**, have the same basic meaning. All refer to the degree of vividness of a color, such as how "red" a red is, or how "blue" a blue is. A totally saturated pure red, for example has no trace of any other pigment in its composition. **Pure** Yellow is only yellow, and so on. (Neither would pure colors contain any white or black.) I sometimes use the word **Gray** in this text. As a noun I use it as a convenient word for a color of lower saturation or purity, in a sentence such as this: *"This is a gray red (or grayer) compared to the other reds."* Using the word gray as a verb I might say, *"If I gray this red it will be correct."* All colors can be grayed (reduced in saturation by adding its complementary color).

THE COLOR WHEEL



The color wheel is simply the visible part of the electromagnetic spectrum arranged in a circle. Colors immediately next to one another are what most people consider harmonious, such as green with blue-green, yellow-green and yellow. Colors opposite one another (directly across the circle) are described as complementary because when they exist as colored light and are then combined, they create white light. We painters are not so fortunate. When we mix complementary pigments together, we risk creating a brown mud.

The color wheel as such does not exist in nature. It is a simple diagram showing the component colors of white light, such as sunlight, when it is optically split by a prism or raindrops (giving us a rainbow). The only noteworthy thing to notice is when you mix colors exactly opposite one another on the wheel, you always end up with some combination of the three primary colors mixed together. The wheel might make an interesting design on a dinner plate though.

6. The words **Color** or **Colors**, **Hue**, **Tint**, **Tone**, and **Shade**, all refer to a particular **Family** of color. The family of Reds, for example, are all the pigment mixtures, or colors in a subject, in which Red predominates, such as Red Orange, Scarlet, all Cadmium Reds, Terra Rosa, Venetian Red, Quinacridone Violet or Red, Vermillion, Madders, the Alizarins, Pink, Magenta, and all shades of Gray or Brown in which red predominates. Likewise, the Blue family of colors is comprised of all blue colors as they come from their tubes, all blue dominant mixtures, and all colors in a subject in which blue predominates, and so on through the entire palette.

7. **White** and **Black** are discussed further along in this section. While neither is a color in the usual sense, adding them to colors to lighten or darken them creates new colors, not just lighter or darker ones. For example, adding white to red to lighten it does indeed create a lighter red, but that is not all it does, because adding the white also makes the red cooler, which is a *new* color.

LIGHT TEMPERATURE and PAINT COLOR TEMPERATURE

The color temperature of light and the color temperatures of the paints we use are closely related, yet they are two quite different ways color comes to us. These differences are explained in detail in the following text.

THE COLOR TEMPERATURE OF LIGHT

Technically speaking, the color of a ray of LIGHT is due to very **specific properties** it possesses—its **frequency and wavelength**. Red light, for example, radiates *only* within the frequencies of 400 to 844THz, with wavelengths of 630 to 700nm. Consequently, red light *always* looks the same no matter what. It cannot change its properties. The same holds true for all colors of light. Each one comes to us in its own specific range of frequencies.

There is also a *subjective* side of light (our experience of it), and it goes like this: eons ago, we humans went about inventing and establishing certain cultural ideas about light, such as light being warm or cold, or divine, or scary, or good for curing warts, or whatever. My guess is our ancestors associated orange, yellow, and red with the warmth of sunlight and firelight. Blues and purples and grays may have been connected to things like coldness and death. Whatever the case, those notions and their variations have continued more or less unchanged through countless generations, and have come down to us today.

Any source of light then, whether it's the sun, your florescent bathroom fixture, or a lighted match, is still described as cold, cool, warm, or hot, or some variant of those. We take it for granted we are correct in saying a light having more red and yellow waves in it than blue waves, is a **warm** light. If it shines with more blue waves than red or yellow ones, we say it is a **cooler** light. This is the way I talk about color as well, and probably the way you do too. We all put temperature tags on colors. Simple!

Well, perhaps not *exactly* simple (and not that it really matters), but the familiar terminology we use to describe the temperature of light is exactly *backwards*. In the strict world of the Thermodynamic Laws in Physics, the *hotter* an energy source is, the *bluer* its light is. Conversely, as an energy source actually *cools*, it changes from yellow, through orange, and then to red (not the other way around as we are accustomed to thinking).

Despite this odd duality, there is presently little danger of anyone changing the ways we speak of color in the near future, however quaintly wrong it may be. (Not unless a great many physicists take up painting tomorrow.) We artists know perfectly well what we mean by *warm* and *cold*. Such attributions have been deeply ingrained into our thinking as well as our language for too long. It has been with us since childhood, so it seems perfectly natural for us—like the way we still say of a modern turbine-driven cargo ship that it is *setting sail* when it leaves port. What always matters in the end is not what or who is correct, but what *works*.

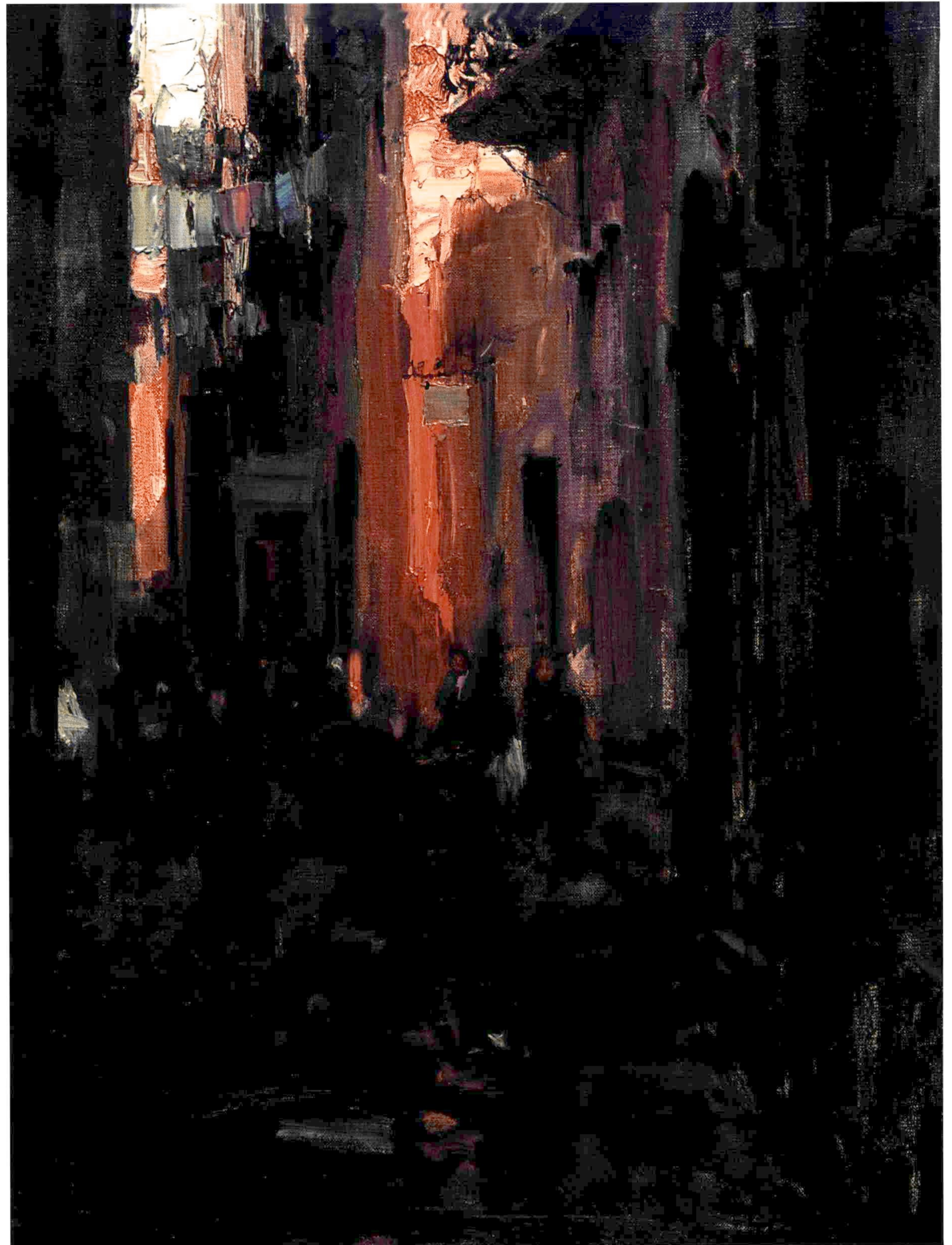
I painted this iconic street scene in Naples in the late afternoon with sunlight coming in from the right, dramatically striking the sides of stucco structures, and leaving the remainder of the scene in shadow.

I had already spent considerable time in Italy and painted several other streets like this, so I was prepared for the colors and values where one part of the canvas was in bright, hot sunlight, and the remainder in cool light from the sky above.

*While you might think this was a complicated problem in **light temperature**, it was actually quite simple: all of the light values caused by the sun were very warm colors, where I used Cadmium Red, Cadmium Yellow, and Cadmium Orange, all raised to a higher value with white. The shadow areas, however, were very cool, but the very darkest accents **within** those cool areas were warm mixtures of Alizarin Deep and Phthalo Green.*

It was also nice to be able to paint this scene with my canvas and palette in the cool shadows of the street. Wherever and whenever it is possible, I always try to have my palette and canvas in the same moderate light. I can then make accurate judgements about my colors and values. If I cannot avoid painting out in full sunlight, I try to make sure both my palette and canvas are in full sunlight. I do this because although I must put up with the extreme brightness of sun on my canvas, I can at least have the same brightness on my palette, which means what I mix on my palette will look the same on my canvas.

However, there remains a serious element of uncertainty in working in sunlight because the brightness results in a tendency to mix colors slightly darker without realizing it. Also the pupils of my eyes contract to pinpoints, which interferes with seeing color.



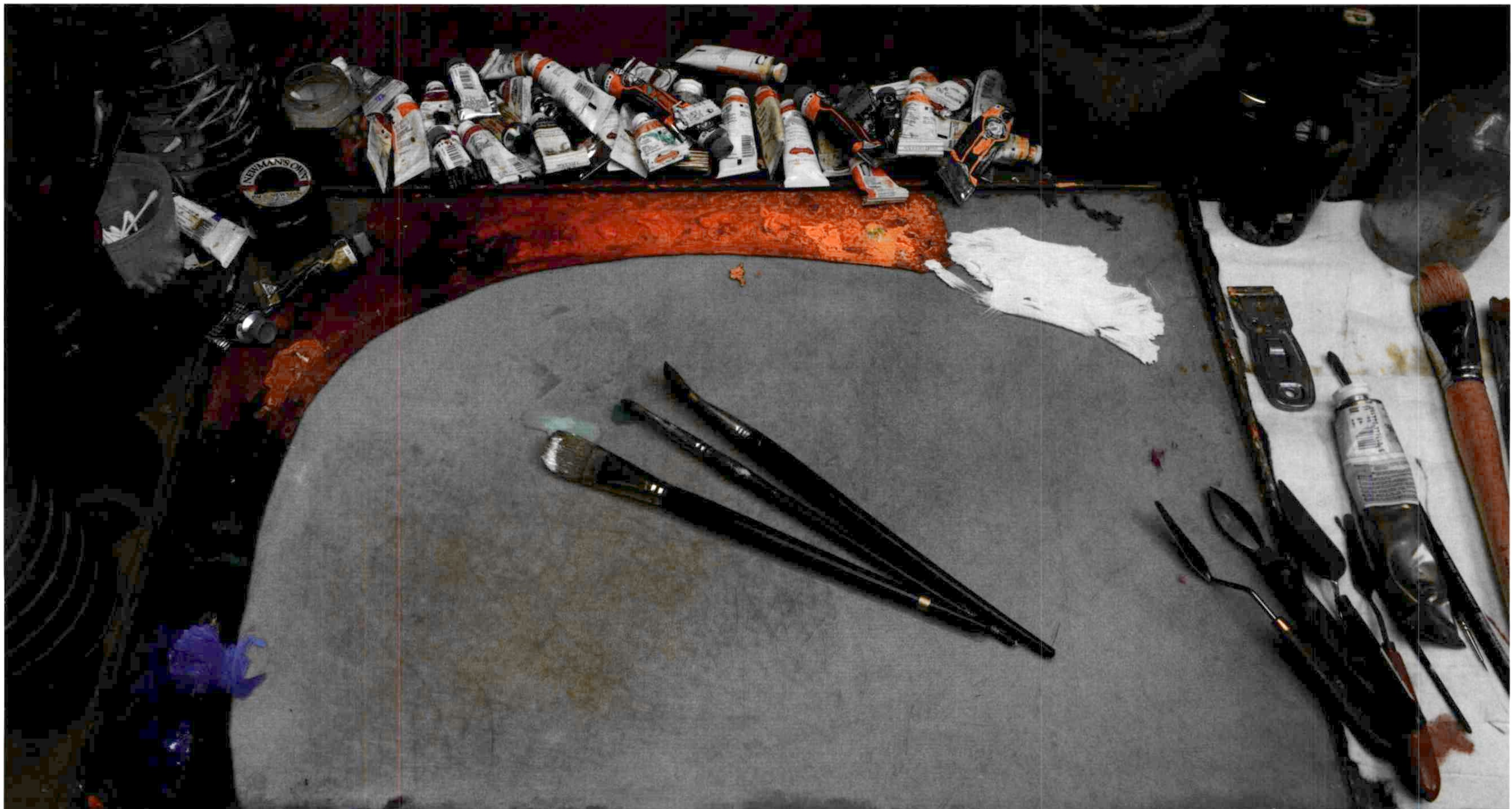
STREET IN NAPLES oil on canvas, 24 x 18, Italy, 1967

THE COLOR TEMPERATURES OF OUR PAINTS

Unlike the colors in light, which as we learned have *permanent* and *invariable* temperatures, the pigments on our palettes have only *apparent* temperatures. These apparent (or effective) temperatures of our palette colors can change dramatically from one situation to the next. ***Palette colors do NOT have specific color temperatures.*** Their temperatures are not fixed and immutable properties. Whether they are oils, watercolors, pastels, acrylics, crayons, or any medium, the colors we use depend upon the ambient light we work in and the initial colors *already* in a painting for the way the rest of our colors will appear to be as we apply them. Those temperatures, whether they look warm or cool, hot or cold, are entirely relative to the overall color harmony of the particular painting they are in. It is a variable effect that fluctuates from one picture to the next. For example, the green I used to paint grass in one sketch done in overcast light did not work in a painting of the same grass in sunlight.

BELIEVE ME, ALL THIS IS TRUE

Yes, if you only look at my palette in the photo below, the colors *are* conspicuously warm, or hot, or cool, or cold, *compared* to one another, but put them in a painting along with hundreds of other colors and shades in a typical work, and they change their appearances like a convention of nervous chameleons. Besides, looking at the photo is the same as looking at a painting of my palette. So the temperature relationships in this case are indeed appropriate and quite correct.



My studio palette rests on a 30" x 50" taboret. The curve of the colors is a result of the reach of my arm with a brush as I am sitting.

WINTER PINES

oil on canvas, 16 x 24, 1969

I include the two works on this page together to show how varied the mood can be in landscapes as a result of a different light on each.

The intensity and color temperature of the light in WINTER PINES (right) is dramatically different than in VERMONT WINTER (below).

I am not saying one lighting situation is necessarily better or worse than another, but there is no question the quality of the light creates the mood. I happen to like a wide range of ambience, depending perhaps on my own state, so I must be ready with a variety of responses.

*VERMONT WINTER*

oil on canvas, 16 x 24, 2002

To prove the point I made above, one glance at VERMONT WINTER (right) makes it clear that light is the key in these works, as well as in most of my other paintings.

Even in pictures or sketches where the drawing, the design, or some other visual element is my main point, I always think carefully about in what type of light I wish to express those things. For example, if I am doing a sketch where the fascinating shape or intricacy of drawing is my message, then a strong light with strong shadows will not do. Only a much softer light will bring out what I see in my subject.



In essence then, and to repeat: *temperature* is how a color looks to us when it is with its neighboring colors. It isn't always going to be what a color looked like when you unscrewed the paint tube cap for a look in the art store. Nor is it necessarily how a color feels physically or emotionally, although those factors are probably a large part of the origins of the concept. On the other hand, I don't know about you, but I must confess I feel a whole lot warmer in my long red underwear than in my plain old gray pair.

Whatever the associations were and still are, the idea that reds and yellows are intrinsically "hot" or "warm," and blues are "cool" or "cold," is customary in our everyday language and thinking. As I learned in my studies in *General Semantics*, it is the conveying of meaning, not smartness, which counts in communication with others. All of us identify cool pigments as those leaning toward blues, greens, and violets; and warm pigments as leaning to reds, or yellow, or the orange family. If I ever tried to use the *Thermodynamic* version of color temperature in discussing color here, you'd probably think I'd taken leave of my senses.

SEEING IT RIGHT

Local colors in my **subject** are powerfully influenced by the temperature of the light shining upon it, so my first job is to find out if the light is warm or cool, *and to what degree*. I make sure to identify the temperature of the light on the subject *before* I start to paint, and keep the temperature relationship consistent throughout the entire course of my painting—no matter what! (And assuming I got it right.) If I should ever start without knowing for sure how warm or cool the light on my subject is, I'd be up the proverbial creek without a paddle.

THE GREAT (AND NEARLY PERFECT) COLOR AXIOM

If for some reason I cannot decide the temperature of a light source, here are two very handy natural facts about light and shadow to help me (and you):

1. **COOL LIGHT PRODUCES WARM SHADOWS.**
2. **WARM LIGHT PRODUCES COOL SHADOWS.**

So all I have to do is look at the shadows on my subject! If they are *warmer* than the light areas, then the *light* source must be *cool*. If the shadows are *cooler* than the light areas, I know my light source is *warm*! If I have any doubt, or if the temperature difference between the light and shadow is too subtle to make a clear distinction, I have a sure-fire way to determine a shadow's temperature. First, I place a small sheet of white paper or cloth somewhere in with my subject, or in the same light. Then I place an object on the white paper in order to cast a shadow. The temperature of the cast shadow will usually be clearly either cooler or warmer than the area of the paper outside the shadow.

Now I have gotten pretty good at recognizing warm and cool differences when I see them, but if I do this little trick and I still can't tell what the light temperature is, it means the light is so evenly balanced, it is neither warm nor cool dominant. This rarely happens, but when it does, it simply means I don't have to be concerned at all about temperature changes in my mixtures when going from light to shadow. I only have to make things lighter or darker without also making those value changes noticeably warmer or cooler.

Of course if all of the above is too much bother, I can always cheat by running down to the camera store and picking up a photo color meter, but it would merely reveal what the meter was measuring, *not how I see the light*. There is a big difference; I am far more than a mechanical recording device. Besides, if I'm out landscape painting and I've neglected to charge the meter, I'm up that creek again.

WARM LIGHT

Honestly, these two images were not altered in color nor exaggerated in Photoshop! The top picture here was lit with an ordinary 150 watt tungsten light bulb. The bottom example was shot under my north light window

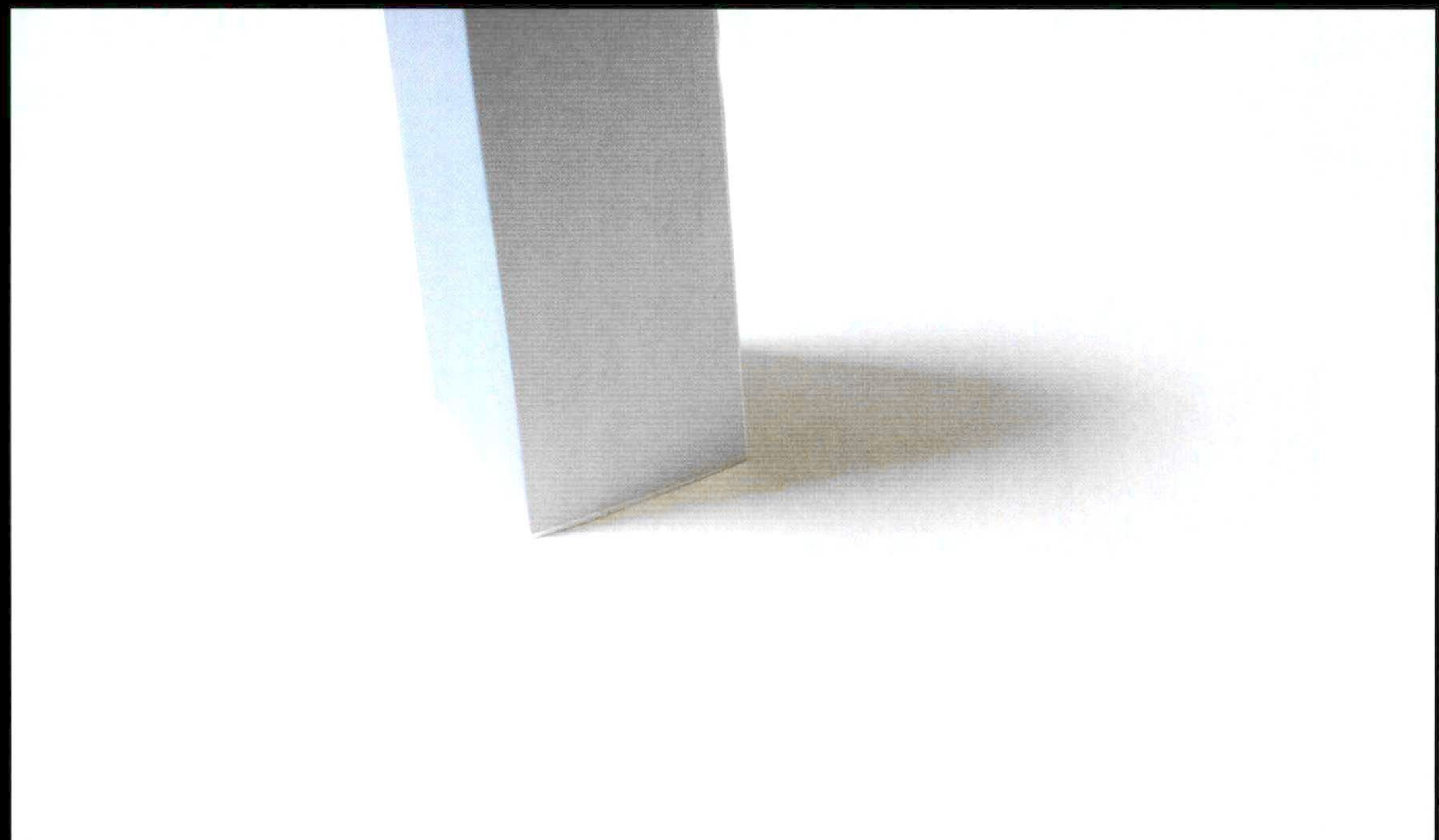
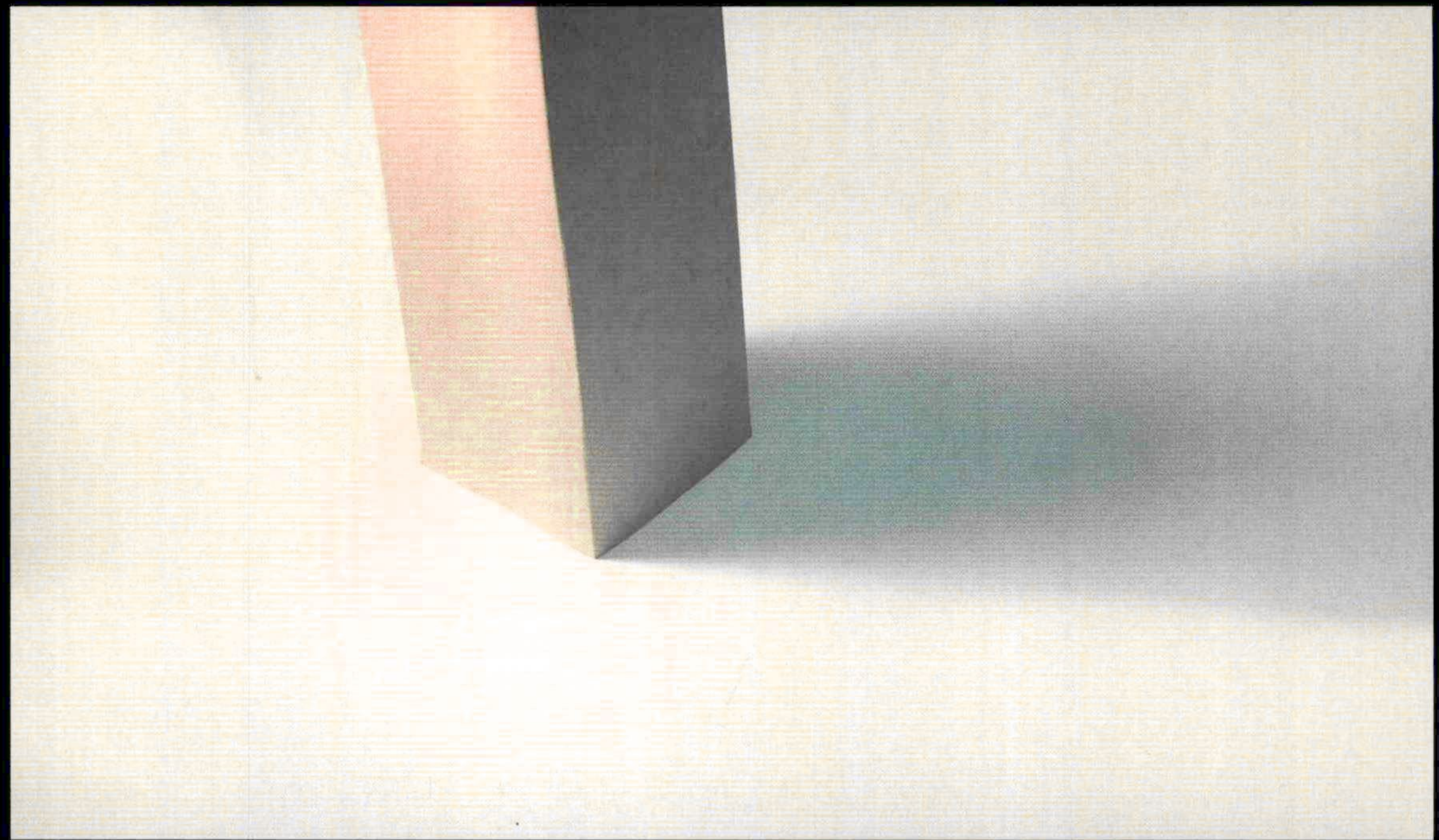
Notice in this top example how the warm color of the light, perhaps Yellow Ochre with White produced an almost blue shadow.

Usually the striking difference in temperature is not as great as it is here, but there will always be this warmth in the light and relative coolness in the shadows. Curiously though, any darks **within** the shadow will be warm.

COOL LIGHT

As you see in this picture everything is the same except for the light, which is as mentioned, the cool light from my big north window. If this were a painting I would probably mix Cobalt Blue with a touch of Transparent Oxide Brown and White for the light. For the shadow I would warm and darken the mixture by increasing the amount of brown.

The nice thing about cool light is it cooperates with our pigments because we usually add white to lighten our mixtures, and since white is the coolest color on our palette, it also cools the light at the same time.



The phenomenon of cool light producing warm shadows, and warm light yielding cool shadows is probably as close to a color law as I know of. It is also one of the most direct and elegant gifts we have in understanding the behavior of light. Think of it! All we have to remember is that light *switches*! (Pardon my pun.) It reverses itself whenever it changes from warm to cool, or the reverse. I wish I could say it is invariable, that there are never any exceptions, but like Newton's First Law, when a given light is acted upon by an outside influence, the warm-cool principle can sometimes falter. Nature is never wholly cooperative, and there are circumstances when the attributes fluctuate. This can happen when light is traveling through a more or less transparent substance (like water), or more often, when there is reflected light bouncing into shadows. In such cases a warm light (such as from a tungsten light bulb) may produce even warmer shadows. Very often a subject's clothing, particularly a blouse or shirt, can reflect upward and change the colors and values under the chin in an ambiguous way. Such occurrences, however, usually happen only in isolated parts of the overall subject.

Still, I have to be on the alert for surprises. I have seen colors in nature I could never have imagined, colors such as the lurid blue of the Mediterranean in bright sunlight, and the deep ultramarine in the crevasses of Alaska's monstrous glaciers. In such cases (as in life), nature calls the shots and explanations are pointless—just do it—paint it the way it looks as best you can, and don't try to figure it out. Remember also, such things are, after all, exceptions. Most of what is out there will just be fun.

YOUR WORKING LIGHT

I work mostly under natural daylight, but I have excellent studio lighting for those times when I need it. I've been at this for a long time, so by now I know which light sources are going to be warm, and which are likely to be cool. Some familiar sources of warm light are: direct sunlight, incandescent (tungsten) lamps, candlelight, firelight, etc. Some familiar examples of cool light are: north daylight, fluorescent lamps including the energy saving screw-in types (5000 to 5500K), certain kinds of street lighting, and some photographic lamps. Incidentally, the "K" in 5500K refers in Physics to the Kelvin scale of absolute temperature. Lighting engineers rate light in "K" degrees. Photoflood bulbs are about 4500 to 5500K, household bulbs about 3000 to 4500K. Clear blue-sky daylight is around 7500K. Light emitting diode (*LED*) lights are semiconductor light sources and are increasingly available these days. Though expensive, they are very energy efficient, remarkably long lasting, and come in just about any color temperature and lamp type you'd want.

Some lights I have had to work under have changed the color temperature appearance of my entire palette. Once, while doing a painting demonstration at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, I had to work under special motion picture lights so the event could be digitally recorded. The illumination was, of course, well balanced for the cameras, but they so distorted the look of my subject, my canvas, and palette colors, I thought I'd go nuts, or blind. Seven hundred artists were in the audience watching me paint. How many sensed I had no idea what I was doing, I'll never know.

There is no bad light except light too dim to see anything. Some light is just easier to work in than others. On another occasion I was demonstrating a still life painting as a fundraiser before an audience, with only a pink spotlight to work by. Under such ghastly illumination, my reds and yellows looked gray, blues and greens appeared black, and so on. It was a color nightmare. The result though was fascinating (for want of a better word), because I had no true idea of what I was doing. It wasn't a bad picture, because it was well-drawn, but when I saw it under normal light, it was not what I thought I had painted. It was definitely a learning experience. The point is at least I came up with something—which wouldn't have happened if there were no light at all.

The photo opposite shows my studio setup and three of the four large north light windows. Each window measures four feet by eight feet high, and the bottom of the window is eight feet above the floor. To give you a little more scale, my easel is seven feet tall.

Below you see my homemade outdoor painting box and the second-hand tripod I have converted into an easel. Notice how everything folds up nicely and then unfolds into a portable studio. The paintbox as you see is quite low because at my age I usually sit in a folding chair when I paint. Not shown are the umbrellas I take along for sunny and rainy days.

Most of the rest of what I need is out of sight in my paintbox along with the chocolate bars and cookies.



At the very minimum you need to be able to see your subject and canvas well enough to paint without guessing at the colors. Van Gogh is not the best example, but if Hollywood movies can be believed, he painted in Paris along the Seine at night with several candles stuck on the brim of his hat (*Lust For Life*, 1956). If that were really true, it might explain some of his use of color. I don't recommend turning yourself into a human Christmas tree like poor Vincent, not in these times when you could strap a few LED flashlights on your head instead.

Seriously, always try for the best light you can. Your light should be steady too. Ideally it should be the same average brightness throughout your working period. When illumination diminishes gradually, as often happens with natural light in late afternoon, your perception of dark colors fails long *before* your perception of light colors. It always happens gradually, so you might not notice. The ideal light to work with is a source that provides nearly (but not quite equal) amounts of the visible spectrum—in other words, almost equal measures of red, yellow, and blue. I say "almost equal" because, in my experience, the conditions are more interesting if one color is slightly dominant. It is also much easier to identify the light temperature if one color stands out.

THE BEST LIGHT

My idea of perfect light for painting (outdoors or in my studio) is a bright high overcast in the summer during the middle hours of the day. Why summertime? Because the days are longer and the sun is higher in the sky. Why overcast? Because sunlight is diffused evenly throughout the cloud layer, and it produces the near ideal color balance I mentioned above. Overcast also tends to be stable, providing generous time for painting.

A painting done under such conditions will look good under almost any subsequent light, but a work done under *extremes* of hot or cold light will usually appear correct only under the same lighting conditions. For example, a painting done while bright sunlight is on the canvas will look very different when brought indoors. When painting in sunlight is unavoidable, at least try to have both your palette and canvas in the sun, so the colors you mix on your palette will look the same when you place them on your picture.

However, be aware of the varying temperature *ranges* which can occur under overcast light. Nature does not always produce an overcast light conspicuously cool. Sometimes the light can be so evenly balanced, the light and shadow temperatures will be nearly identical (as described at the bottom of page 202). I have seen this happen most often when the overcast ceiling is so low it constitutes fog, but it can occur under almost any overcast situation. This can be very challenging. What to do? Well, you can't change what nature is doing with her clouds. I just accept the colors I see, and do the best I can to match them. I tell myself the colors in the light are what they are, and the darks are simply the same colors only darker without being obviously warmer or cooler.

Here is a little tip for outdoor painting, especially in sunlight—wear dark clothing. A white shirt will reflect on a canvas, or on the wet surface of a watercolor, causing disturbing glare, particularly in the darker values of your work. Painting in bright sun causes two other problems (not to mention sunburn). First, the pupils of your eyes close down to pinpoints, which for physiological reasons, will cause you to see less color. Second, the extreme brightness makes your mixtures *appear* much lighter in value, when in fact they are darker. A good example is Alizarin Crimson, which in normal viewing light is almost as dark as Black, but in bright sunlight is about the same value as Terra Rosa, a difference of at least two values lighter. That, in turn, can make you overcompensate by mixing your paints too dark in value.

One common result of working with the sun on your canvas is this: when you see your painting under ordinary light, (which usually means indoors), it will probably be a somewhat darker painting, but it might be more colorful (saturated) as well. Why? Because as you work, the bright sunlight will cause the mixtures on your canvas to *appear* lighter than they really are. You will probably have mixed *less* white into your colors without realizing it. Mixtures with less white in them are always more saturated. Therefore, when you take your picture indoors, it will likely seem darker and more vibrant than it looked outdoors.



RED BEGONIAS and WHITE RHODODENDRONS oil on canvas, 8 x 16, 2007

This painting is a good example of the fact that, for the most part, the pigments we use are at their richest under moderate cool lighting when they are seen as middle tones rather than very bright or dark shades. To demonstrate this, try taking any of the darkest pigments on your palette, such as Ultramarine Blue, Alizarin Crimson, Thalo Green, or similar dark colors, and then add just a tiny amount of white to any of them and notice how beautifully saturated they become. Likewise, colors that are naturally lighter as they come from the tube (this would be the yellow family) take on a deeper richness as they are mixed with either reds or greens to produce tones in the orange family or yellow-green family.

Notice how I was able to use Cadmium Red, Cadmium Scarlet, Cadmium Orange, and Cadmium Yellow Deep, as they came straight from the tube without having to show them as mixtures, with the exception of the red flowers where I added Permanent Alizarin Crimson for a deeper but still highly saturated red. Also I held back slightly in the color saturation of the greens in order to keep them a bit more quiet than the reds and yellows. Also note that with a moderately illuminated subject like this, I was able to give the white flowers subtle tones of pinks, greens, and yellows while still having them appear to be white flowers.

There is no question about staying out of the sun to paint if at all possible. It's actually easy. The simple solution is to have the right kind of umbrella handy, one big enough to shade you, your canvas, *and* your palette. Umbrellas should also be colorless and translucent enough to allow *enough good working light* to come through. White nylon is good, Black or colored is not. Your umbrella should also be the kind you can anchor to the ground easily but firmly. Watch out for those clever little umbrellas which clamp on your French easel. I have seen them become airborne in a high wind, taking French easel, brushes, and painting, up, up, and away to Emerald City.

Some art suppliers still persist in selling black umbrellas. Working with one of those must be like locking yourself in a dark closet to paint. They also come in bright colors, cute decorator patterns, or fabrics which allow no light to filter through. Stay away from such worthless things. When you go out to paint, it's about serious work, not picnicking. (And even if you do feel silly sitting under it when it's not raining, it's worth it.) When you see old photos of Sargent, Monet, and others painting outdoors, they always had a big white umbrella under the noonday sun, quite unlike mad dogs and Englishmen (thank you Noel Coward).

ARTIFICIAL LIGHT

If you must paint by artificial light (and most of us have at times—or all the time), the 5500K fluorescent lamps I mentioned are the best source I have used so far. I have twelve 48-inch, 40-watt fluorescent tubes, arranged in four fixtures. (See the photo on page 205.) They are available from any lighting supply store. The lights are color balanced and steadier than daylight, but they do somewhat lack the softer, more diffused quality of natural light. Their actual light output does not change until they near the end of their life, about 24,000 hours. If your ceiling will allow it, the ideal height of the light fixtures above the studio floor should be not more than 12 feet. Also, mine are mounted slightly behind my working position.

If the familiar fluorescent fixtures are a problem in your situation, there are many other very good alternatives available. There are too many to name individually here, so I suggest you visit a lighting center, home improvement super store, a licensed electrician, or the Internet, to see the wide variety of excellent lighting developed, and now available, since I first wrote about this in the original edition of *Alla Prima*. Be sure the light bulb or tube you buy has 5500K on it.

I definitely do *not* recommend ordinary (tungsten) light bulbs for studio work unless there is no other possible choice. Their color balance is weighted toward yellow and orange, so much so the blue family of colors is sharply reduced. Blues, violets, and greens will all appear less intense than they would be in more balanced lighting. As a result, paintings done under tungsten light often appear to have their cool colors exaggerated when viewed in a better light. (Because blues under yellow or orange light look less saturated, you must make them more intense than you would under balanced lighting.) Tungsten bulbs also produce very pronounced shadows with hard edges. If those hard shadows are a problem, paint your ceiling a bright cool white, and bounce your lights off of it for a more diffused illumination. If color is unimportant to you, for example, if you work in monochrome, it doesn't matter what light you use, as long as you can see what you are doing.

THE GOOD OLD DAYS

You think you have problems with light? Imagine how difficult it must have been for painters in the past! Today we have the advantage of sophisticated controlled electrical lighting on demand, but they had only natural light for daytime (over which they had no control). When daylight faded, their choices were dismal—torches, candles, oil lamps, and later, gaslight—all of them firelight in one form or another. Few artists, however, painted after sundown, preferring in their evenings to do drawings or other things not requiring color (serious drinking perhaps, and heaven only knows what else). Artists in those bygone days were the earliest of risers, getting up at the crack of dawn, despite hangovers no doubt, to take full advantage of daylight. So for painters, everything has really changed since the good old days, everything that is except how to spend their evenings.



FIGURE STUDY oil on paper, 7.5 x 4.5, 1970



NANCY'S DOLL oil on canvas, 36 x 20, 1990, by Nancy Guzik

HOW LIGHT WORKS WITH AND AGAINST COLOR

This is a modest little point, but it is important to know. Let us go back to the fact that in many cases adding white to a color is the only choice for making it lighter. So far so good, but what also happens is this: when we add white to any color or mixture, we also *cool* it. It's like putting snow in your coffee. This happens because white is the coldest pigment on our palette compared to all of our other colors. It lowers the *saturation* of any color it is mixed with. Fortunately, this works to our advantage when we work in cool light because colors on a subject get cooler as they get lighter—the same thing happens when white pigment is added to colors. ***Cool light then works with our mixtures.*** This is one of the reasons why many artists prefer cool overcast north daylight.

Warm or hot light, on the other hand, works against our mixtures when we have to lighten them. Why? Because the colors in our subject get warmer as they get lighter, and since we usually cannot avoid using white to lighten mixtures, we have a problem keeping those mixtures warm as we lighten them. We must constantly compensate for the cooling effect of white by also introducing yellows and reds when raising values.

Extremely bright high-contrast light also poses color problems. For one thing, our pupils contract, and we tend to squint (as I described in sunlight painting), preventing us from seeing all the colors available in our subjects (particularly in the darks). Moreover, when we are facing directly into a bright light or our subject is back-lit, most of the middle tones diminish (the silhouette effect), and all we see is glare and shadow. For this reason, high-contrast situations tend to result in less colorful paintings. More moderate light, such as diffused overcast daylight, cooperates best of all with our seeing, our subject, and our paint. Our eyes relax to let in even the subtlest of tones. The colors in the subject, as well as our pigments, appear in their natural strength. Because colors are at their highest levels of intensity in the middle-to-light range of values, we can match the colors we see effortlessly.

Mother Nature is often kind enough to present herself in manageable splendor, almost as if she is begging to be painted. Occasionally, however, her intense light, high contrasts, and color temperature extremes can sometimes make a literal painting impossible. Back in art school, when I was far enough along in my development to grasp what he was talking about, the Master introduced me to ways of manipulating pigments to achieve the *effect* of colors and conditions of bright contrast in a subject that otherwise might be considered beyond the range of oil paints. As a result of what I learned, I understood things that had earlier eluded me in some of the works of the Impressionists and other artists of their time.

I realized they faced the same challenges we do today, one of which is how to effectively raise the value of a color without losing its intensity (saturation). Our common problem stems from the fact that white is our lightest color, and we must often use it as the only way of achieving certain high-keyed colors. (We can't just turn up the brightness control.) Simply adding white to a color doesn't always do the job. Why? Because above a certain value, colors start looking "chalky." They appear more white and opaque, less "vivid" or "saturated" with color. In lightening, we lose color intensity. The only exception to this is when a very small amount of white is added to the very darkest palette colors, such as Ultramarine Blue, Alizarin Crimson, Thalo Green or Blue, and other extremely dark colors you might use. Because those pigments are so very dark it can often be hard to fully determine their true color. A very tiny amount of white added to those colors will make them come alive.

A conspicuous example of this problem is the task of painting the brightness of an orange streak in a sunset without losing its vivid orange glow. The solution is to paint the *temperature* of the orange streak relative to its surrounding colors, rather than trying to capture the true brightness of the colors in the sky and elsewhere. In other words, deal with the question of how *hot* the streak is compared to everything else in sight. Often, simply *cooling* all other colors in the painting will make the streak look "hotter" simply by comparison. This awareness of *color temperature* is the key to "seeing" color, because color temperature *relationships* are what makes colors look the way they do when they are together in a painting. (And *light temperature* makes that happen too, but more on that later.)



VERMONT SPRING oil on canvas, 20 x 36, 2006

This is another example of how moderate light brings out the best in color. This time we see this as it happens in landscape painting. Other examples of this can be seen on pages 17, 21, 71, 103, 125, 163, 229, 279, 285 and page 286. Soft or moderate lighting also works well because our eyes respond best to the visual world when the light is neither too bright nor too dim.

Under average light, such as you see above, overall harmony is much easier to see and paint than with situations of extreme light or dark illumination. We see one reason for this in very bright light where high contrast, and therefore dark shadows, are produced. The shadows have a somewhat shattering effect on harmony as compared to softer lighting where the overall color mood is uninterrupted and the various elements in the painting are reinforcing one another throughout the entire work.

For example, let your eyes take a journey around this painting and see how the dominant color tone of the sky repeats itself in the roof of the building and the reflection in the water, and then enjoy the moments I played within the red and orange green harmonies everywhere.

CHAPTER EIGHT—THE PALETTE AND VITAL CHARTS

THE COLORS

To mix the colors I want, I must have a basic and well balanced set of pigments, and I *must* know what will happen when I mix them together. The colors listed or mentioned in the text of this book are of various brands. I make no claim one is better or worse than another. I buy the paints I do mostly by how well they have performed for me over time. I indicate the brand I use because the shade of a color can vary widely among manufacturers. The colors within certain brands can also change from time to time without notice. I choose the brands I do because the manufacturers have been generally consistent in making their colors with respect to hue, density of color, and brushing consistency. Brand abbreviations are: WN-*Winsor&Newton*[®], R-*Rembrandt*[®], G-*Gamblin*[®], OH-*Old Holland*[®], and L-*Lefranc*[®].

MY CURRENT BASIC PALETTE (For both indoor and outdoor work):

Cadmium Lemon (WN)

Cadmium Yellow Pale (WN)

Cadmium Yellow Deep (R)

Yellow Ochre Light (WN) This color varies considerably depending on the brand. I'm using Winsor&Newton at this writing (2013) because it's close to the classic version I prefer.

Cadmium Red (WN)

Terra Rosa (WN)

Alizarin Permanent (G) Bob Gamblin's excellent replacement (it doesn't fade or crack) for the bad old Alizarin Crimson.

I'll never understand why some color makers still market traditional Alizarin Crimson knowing of its serious defects.

Transparent Oxide Red (R) This color replaces the Burnt Sienna Deep I used for many years as the brown on my palette. It is permanent, darker, and nicely transparent (which Burnt Sienna is not).

Viridian (R)

Cobalt Blue Light (R) I choose the light shade of Cobalt Blue to give myself the choice of a value difference between blues.

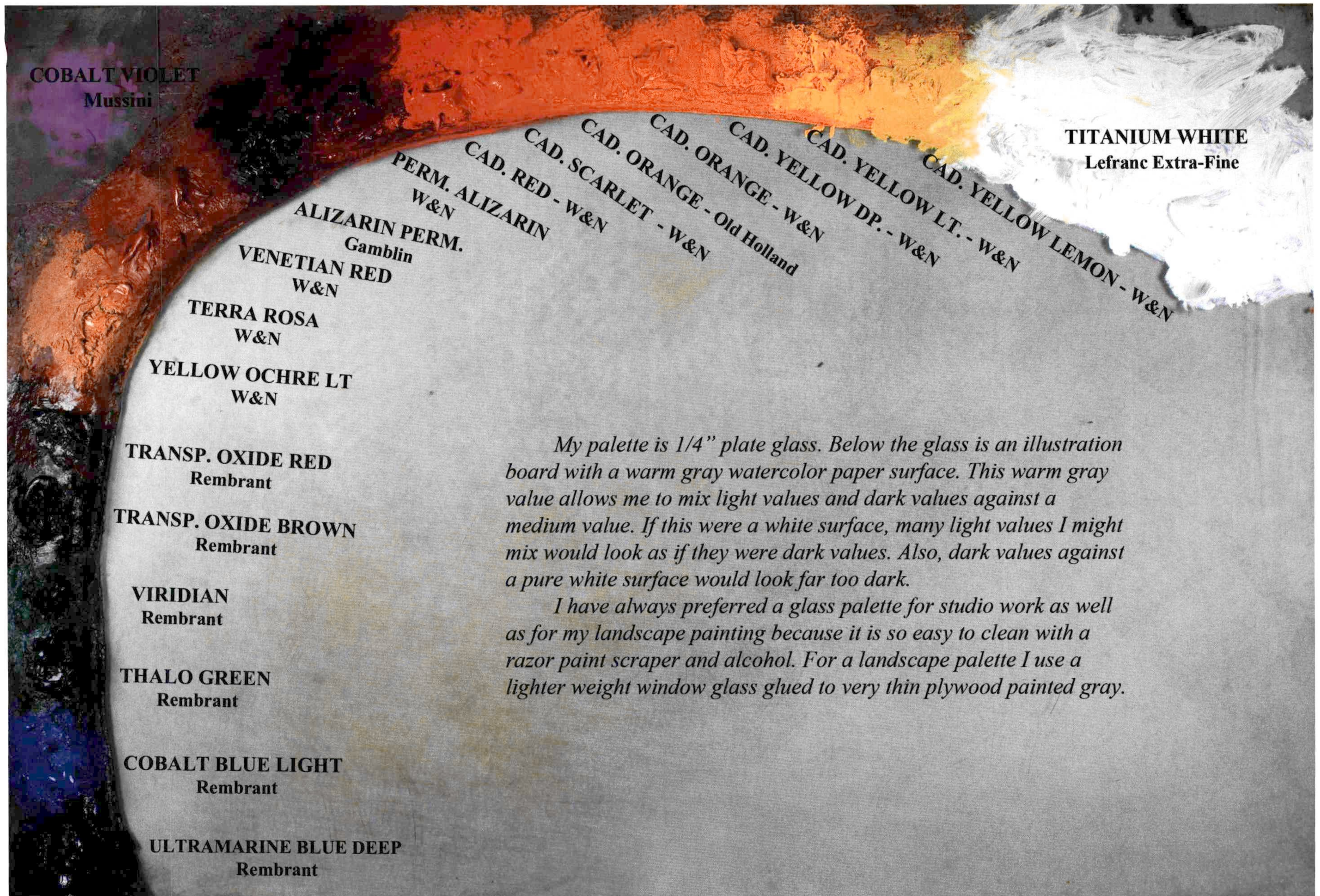
Ultramarine Blue Deep (R)

Titanium White (L)

With these few colors I can duplicate virtually all the other manufactured colors (at least those worth bothering with), so it is unnecessary to take up palette space with more paints. Strictly speaking, I don't really need Cadmium Yellow Deep, Yellow Ochre Light, or Terra Rosa, since all of those can be mixed from the remaining colors, but I use them so much it is more convenient to just squeeze them from a tube. For the same reason, I often put Cadmium Scarlet for a warmer red, and Cadmium Orange, on my palette when I'm working in warm light or with a subject having lots of those colors, such as *Begonias* on page 22.

Occasionally, I'll add either Cobalt Violet Light or Dark (genuine version of both) to my palette when I need a brilliant violet or purple, because the Alizarin plus Ultramarine Blue mixtures are not as saturated in lighter values. Cobalt Violet is unusually expensive compared to most other pigments, and it's like caviar (a little on a cracker goes a long way). I use it sparingly. Its high price is probably a good thing, because it curbs my temptation to use it indiscriminately, which can easily happen. In all my years of painting, I have found very few subjects displaying a great amount of super-saturated violet, but then I never had the challenge of painting ladies like those who sat for Sargent. I did do a portrait of a gal with purple lipstick and nails once! What fun!

I did use Ivory Black at one time, but no more. It cracks, and it is too easy to use it simply to darken colors. I prefer to mix my own versions of black with a combination of other colors such as Ultramarine Blue plus Alizarin Crimson plus Transparent Oxide Red. These "blacks" yield a deeper black, and have a much richer quality because they belong to a distinctive color family.



MY TRADITIONAL STUDIO PALETTE (20" x 30" Plate Glass)

For more information on my palette, how it has changed over the years, and the reasons why, see *Alla Prima II: COMPANION*, Richard Schmid's *Materials, Tools and Techniques* by Katie Swatland. Also included in this book are detailed discussions on the properties of pigments and light, and how this knowledge is essential to achieving authenticity with color.

My preference is to keep my palette selection simple and basic—the fewest colors I need. The ones I have listed constitute a classic group of pigments to which other colors can be added, removed, or substituted to fit special circumstances. This choice of colors is often referred to as the so called *Rubens* or *Flemish* (and *Dutch*) palette. Strictly speaking, my colors are not the same as Rubens'. They are modern versions of course. Painters in past centuries did not have the brilliant colors we enjoy today, but my palette reflects the philosophy of their times, which is to work with the fewest number of colors necessary—three primary yellows, two primary reds, two primary blues, three earth colors, and an all-purpose green.

LEARNING COLORS—THE CHARTS

Actual painting begins when I have identified the colors I see in my subject and start dipping into the little piles of paint. How do I know what to mix with what to get what I want? In my case, I had to be taught how to do that. Nothing in my genes or in the stars was of any help whatsoever. My initiation into the world of color began sixty-some years ago, when I first entered Bill Mosby's class at the old American Academy of Art.

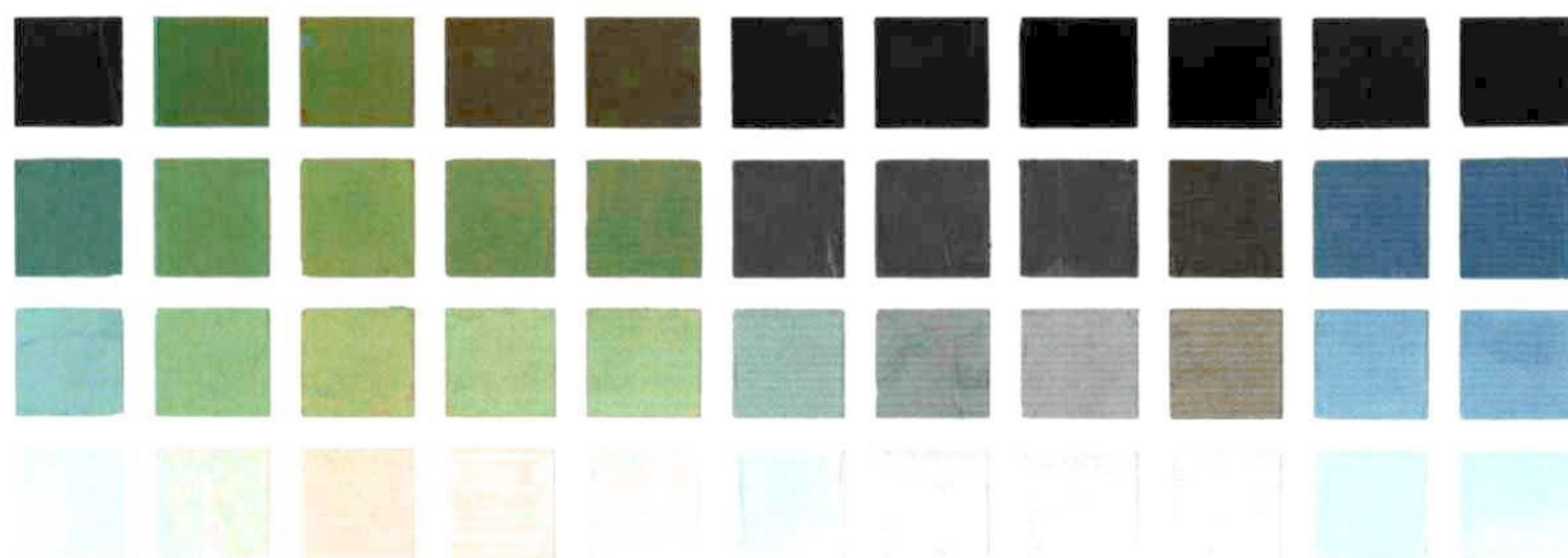
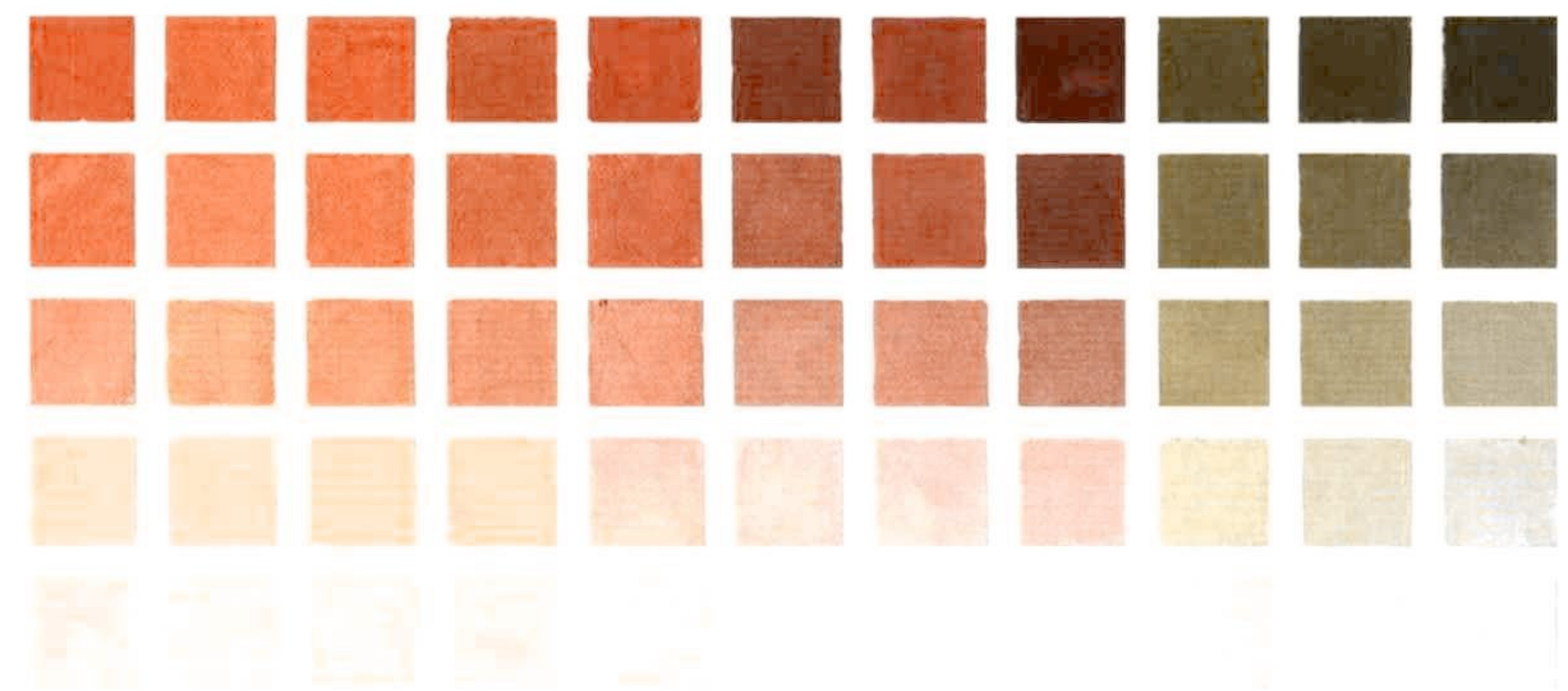
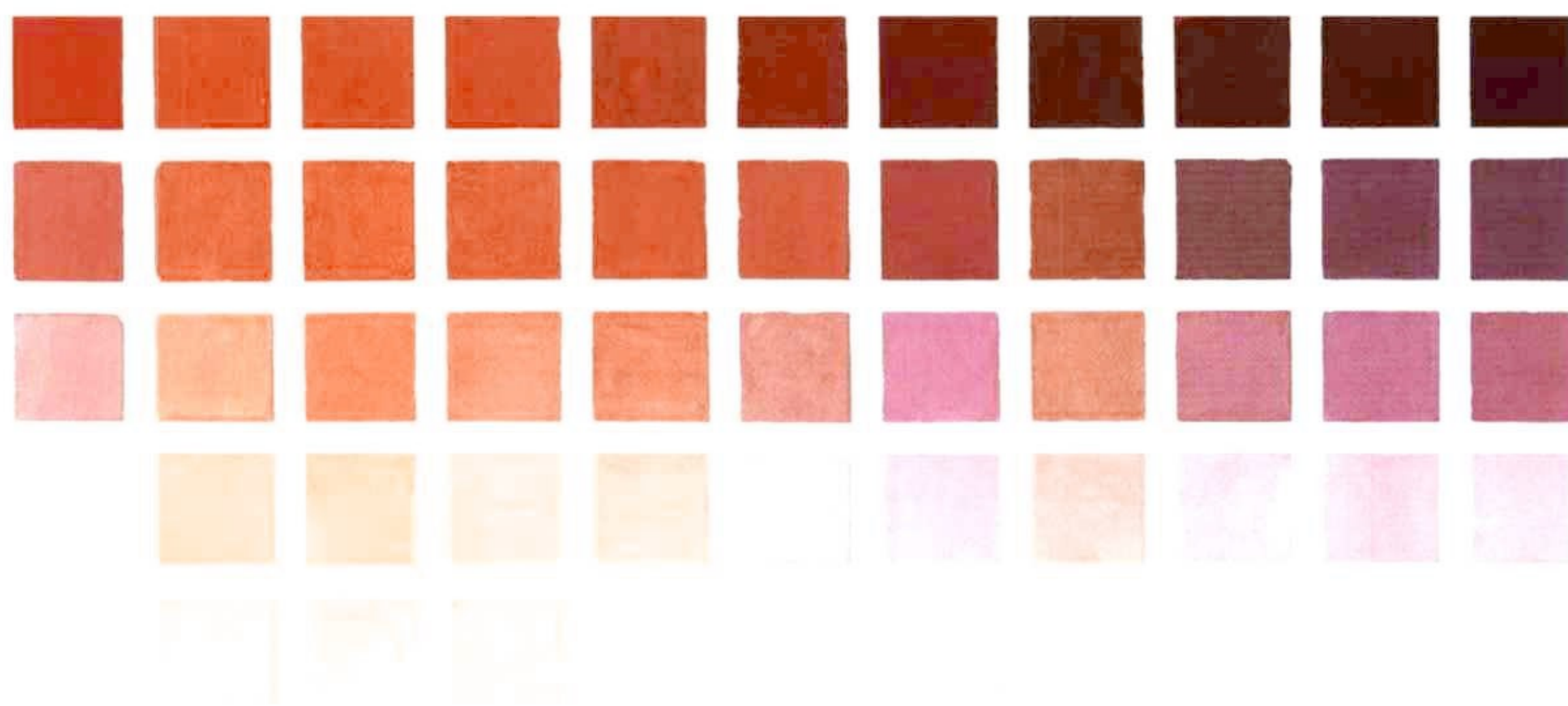
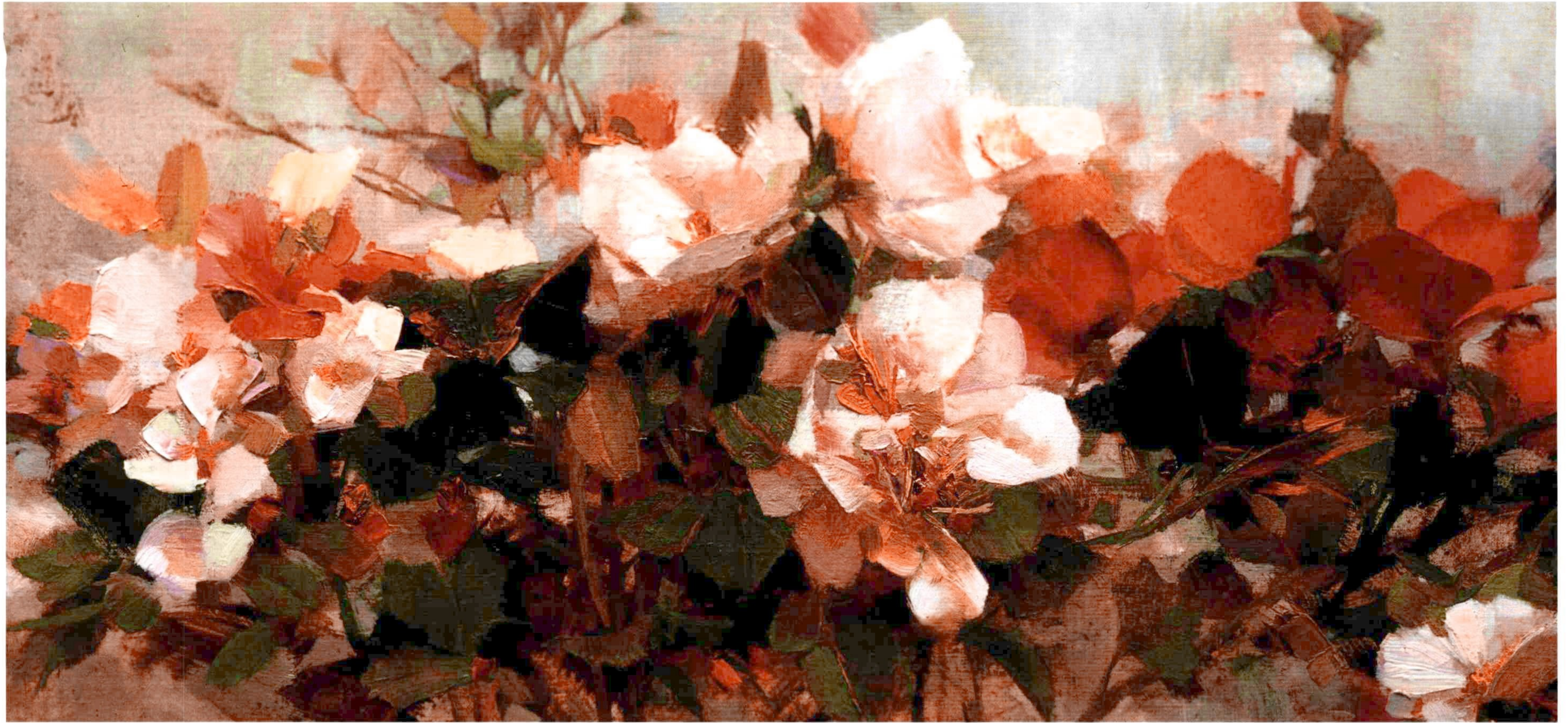
I already knew a few things—red and yellow made orange; yellow and blue made green; violet was blue mixed with red; white or black made things lighter or darker, and mixing everything together made gray, or brown, or mud, but that was the extent of my color knowledge, even though I'd been fooling with oil paints since I was fourteen. Some earlier instruction (and nonstop trial and error) had given me an inkling of color theory—just enough, however, to screw up, which I did.

Mosby liked to describe my efforts as being like those of a rookie baseball pitcher—lots of speed, but no control! (He had a certain way of going right for the jugular.) He could be rough talking at times, but I loved him like a father and absorbed every word he said. The extent of his knowledge was extraordinary, and some of what he taught me did not fully register in my mind or my work until I had enough experience to grasp it. Before I was allowed to paint from the model, he suggested (commanded) I do the legendary color charts—an exercise designed to explore the possible color mixtures of my palette. The charts, a time-tested method of teaching color, were his way of showing me just what I was getting myself into. His initial assessment of my color skills indicated it was ludicrous for me to begin painting until I understood much more about my paints.

He was right. Also, he was not receptive (to put it mildly) to the idea that some people have a natural sense of color. He thought you had to work at it. So did I, and I still do. It just made good sense to at least try out all the colors I would be working with, and understand how they behaved with one another. After all, I was doing exactly the same thing in studying the piano. In order to play music I had to learn all the basics. Knowing the key signatures, scales, chord structures, and arpeggios, made it possible. It would have been ridiculous not to at least try out all eighty-eight keys to hear what they sounded like.

As a prelude to actual painting, I was introduced to a rational palette of colors, and shown how to make charts by mixing each of my pigments in a methodical way with all the others (only nine at the time; today it is eleven). The purpose was to see, understand, and remember what they looked like when they interacted. Then I had to blend white into those mixtures and render each out to five values. It was not something that could be done by rote. The charts had to be executed with intense concentration if they were to come out right. Mosby hovered over me all the while, waiting to pounce if I got the color mixtures even slightly wrong, or if my values failed to graduate with perfect uniformity. To make it harder (I thought), he made me do it all with a palette knife. I was clumsy with the knife at the beginning—a bricklayer could have done better with his trowel—but in the end I was wielding the knife like a Ninja swordsman. Thus, in doing the charts, I also acquired skills with a new tool, the knife, one I have treasured ever since. Mosby was a smart guy.

Surprisingly, the charts took only two weeks to complete, and when I finished I knew more about my paint than I had ever thought possible. It was an astonishing experience—imagine being taken into the kitchen of a great chef and shown everything he could do with flavors. That was what it was like for me! There was nothing tedious or boring about doing the charts. Each was a revelation of the power awaiting me when I did start painting.



Just to show again how marvelous the color charts can be, imagine the three color charts shown here, not as boringly identical squares arranged in perfect rectangles, but instead as flowers, leaves, stems and a background.

The color charts, and the knowledge of how to use them changed my thinking about what painting really is to me. It was another of those AH-HAH moments where I realized the immensity of what awaited me.

I have done the charts several times over the years. Each new episode in rendering them has given me fresh insights about color. I did not think it was possible, but undoubtedly my interim experience had something to do with it—very much like any practicing professional returning to school often realizes a more enriched understanding than a beginner. The charts still take about two weeks from start to finish, an amazingly brief time spent when I think about it. Imagine, only two short weeks to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the paints I must use for the rest of my life to depict my view of the world!

Many of my fellow students regarded the charts as just an ordeal to be dispatched with as quickly as possible, or simply bypassed for a crack at what they viewed as the more serious business of immediately expressing themselves with paint. In their impatience to get to painting, they missed the whole point that it was the *doing* of the charts and *how* they were done that really mattered. I was lucky because I truly enjoyed doing them, just as I loved the sound of playing scales on my piano. I thought they were fun, like making cake frosting and getting to eat it all myself instead of just licking the pan. No tummy ache either, just deliriously beautiful color! The meticulous attempt to make my color mixtures and transitions perfect gave me not only a grasp of the astonishing potential of my palette, but the ability to unerringly mix any color I needed—without guesswork.

DOING THE CHARTS

This is about creating the charts with oil paint, but they can be done with any medium you wish—watercolor, pastel, acrylic, etc. Oils are best, however, because they can be endlessly corrected and adjusted before applying them to the charts, something not easily done with water based media. Regardless of the medium, doing them will enhance your understanding of how color works, with whatever materials you are familiar with. If you are like me, you will use the charts constantly as a reference when you paint, so do them on a durable surface, one which will stand up to many years of service. You might want to put an acetate cover on them too, as you will be handling them with paint on your hands.

For oil paints I recommend using Gatorfoam® Board or canvas board. Neither requires any preparation. Just cut them to size if necessary, and lay on some tape for the squares. For water media such as watercolor, acrylics, or gouache, a good quality, double thick, smooth illustration board works well. I did the charts for this book on 8" x 15" panels with one inch color squares—larger than that is too cumbersome when using the charts, and smaller is insufficient for color recognition. The squares here were laid out with strips of narrow (1/4 or 1/2 inch) easily removable tape. (Try it out on a test board first, you wouldn't want the tape ripping up the surface of your board.)

I recommend peeling away the tape as soon as you are satisfied with the mixtures, and while the paint is still wet. (Removing the tape after the paint has dried is agony.) If you wish to correct your charts at a later date, you can always put tape back on. While the charts are drying, put them where the cat won't step on them. When they are thoroughly dry (three months minimum for oil paint), give them a light coat or spray of synthetic picture varnish such as Soluvar® gloss. Do not use Damar varnish or other natural resins. They yellow and darken with time, causing a very noticeable change in delicate lighter values.





WINDOW BOX PANSIES (Detail), oil on panel, 8 x 12, 2006

THE CHART BASICS (Using my palette colors as an example.)

The initials used to designate colors on the charts are as follows:

Cadmium Lemon - CL

Cadmium Yellow Pale - CY (It's the same as Cadmium Yellow Light.)

Cadmium Yellow Deep - CYD

Yellow Ochre Light - YO

Cadmium Red - CR

Terra Rosa - TR

Alizarin Crimson - AC

Transparent Oxide Red - TOR

Viridian -V

Cobalt Blue Light - CBL

Ultramarine Blue Deep - UBD

White - W

The charts in this new *Alla Prima II* edition are nearly the same as the set in the original printings of *Alla Prima*. I have made a few corrections and eliminated some of the marks of wear and tear, like the spilled coffee stains and finger marks from my frequent use. **Chart number one** is shown and described on the page opposite. The eleven remaining charts are explained and shown below and on the next several pages.

THE COLOR DOMINANT CHARTS

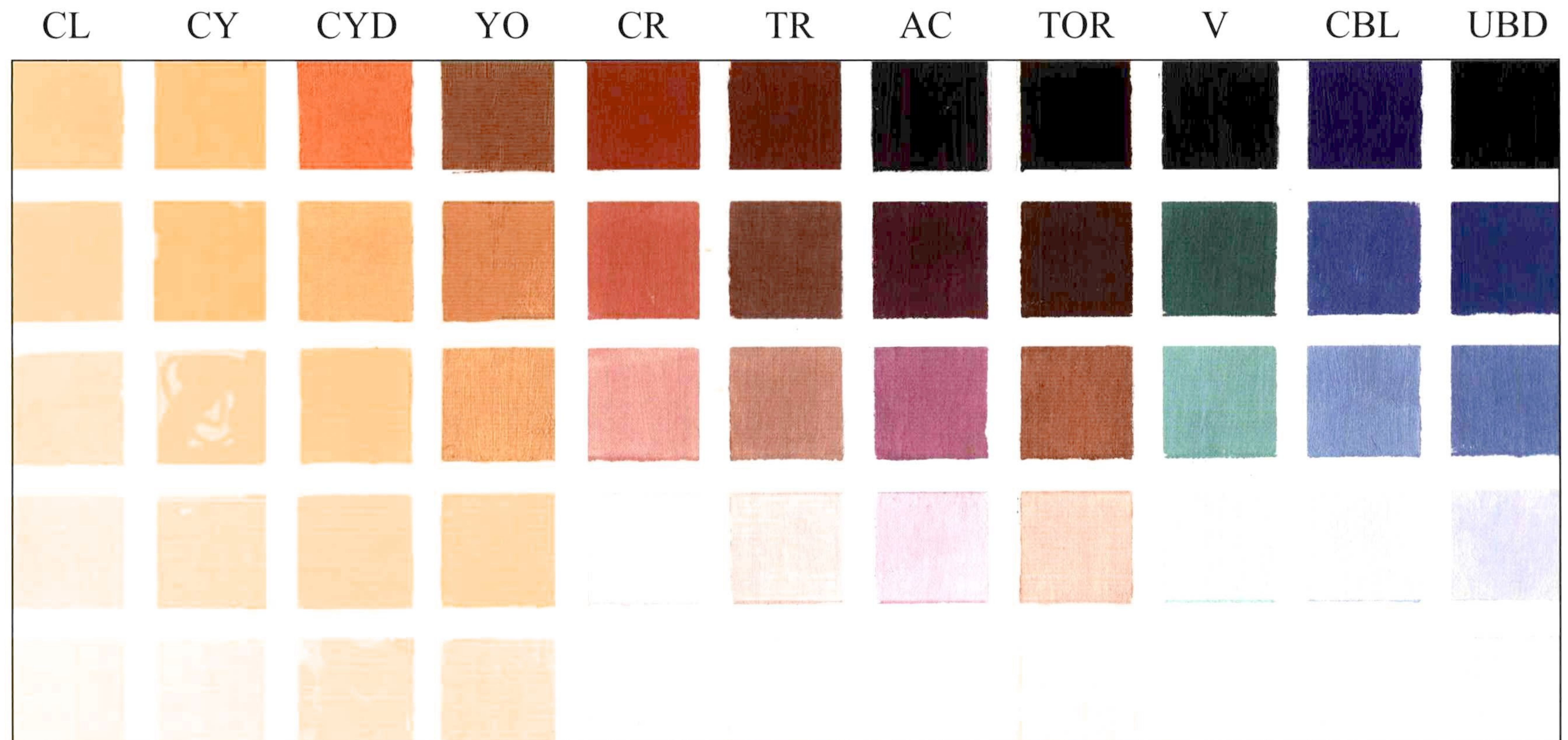
The second chart is Cadmium Lemon ***predominating***—Cadmium Lemon mixed with each of the other palette colors (top row), with ***Cadmium Lemon recognizable as the stronger of the two colors in the mixture***. Thus the top squares are: (1) Cadmium Lemon alone, (2) Cadmium Lemon + Cadmium Yellow Pale, (3) Cadmium Lemon + Cadmium Yellow Deep, (4) Cadmium Lemon + Cadmium Red, (5) Cadmium Lemon + Terra Rosa, and so on through Ultramarine Blue. The top mixtures are then, each in turn, lightened with white down to five values as in the first chart.

The third chart is ***Cadmium Yellow Pale predominating***. The fourth chart is ***Cadmium Yellow Deep*** predominant. The fifth is Yellow Ochre Light the strongest in the mixture, then Cadmium Red, Terra Rosa, and so on until each color has been mixed with every other and rendered with white to five values.

Are you still with me? If not, please look at the charts in the next pages, and it will all make sense!

Care must be taken to avoid ***exactly*** equal mixtures. The signature color of each chart—for example, Cadmium Red in the Cadmium Red chart—should predominate, but not overwhelm. The dominant color should not saturate the entire chart to the extent you cannot tell which other color besides Cadmium Red has been mixed with it. To be sure, it's a delicate act of judgment, but that is the point of doing these charts: ***to sharpen your ability to make those critical color judgments when you paint***. Now with colors which are very similar to begin with, in this case the first two yellows and the two blues, it is almost impossible to make crystal clear distinctions. The two Cadmiums, Lemon and Yellow Pale, or mixtures of Cobalt Blue and Ultramarine Blue, are so alike to begin with, they will lose their individual identities even more when mixed together and extended down to five values. So, the charts are all about the behavior of color, and these are just some of the valuable things you will learn.

COLOR CHART ONE - MY BASIC PALETTE COLORS




























































































































This first chart is simply the colors of my palette arranged across the top row—one square for each just as it comes from the tube—then each color lightened with white to make the five-value columns. So far so good!

- *The bottom row should be just barely off-white—the lightest value possible while still remaining identifiable as a color.*
- *The middle row must be a value halfway between the top and bottom rows. Notice this will vary because the values in the top row range from very light colors (Cadmium Lemon), to very dark (Alizarin Crimson, Ultramarine Blue, etc.).*
- *The second row and fourth row are halfway values between the middle row and the bottom and top rows.*

Note: Cadmium Lemon and Cadmium Yellow, as I mentioned, are very light values to begin with, which makes it very hard to stretch them out to five clearly distinct values. What you see above is the best I can do with them. The others are easier, especially the darkest ones, because the difference between their natural values (top row), and their values, which are lightened up to just off-white, are pretty clear.

Notice too how the naturally dark colors in the top row seem to wake up and become more colorful by just the slightest addition of white to raise their values in the third and fourth rows. All of the colors lose an incremental amount of saturation as they are lightened, and all colors become progressively cooler in temperature as they lighten. These facts apply to all of the colors on all of the remaining charts as well.








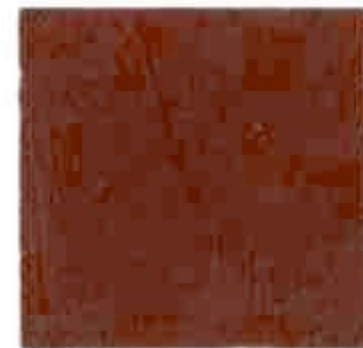

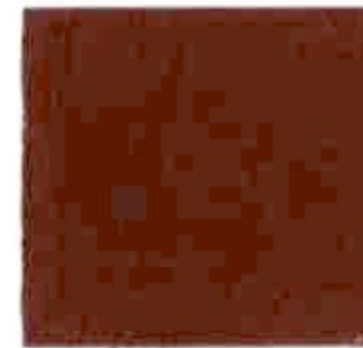
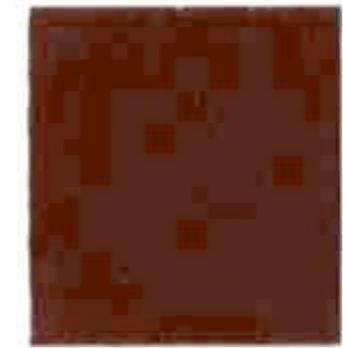








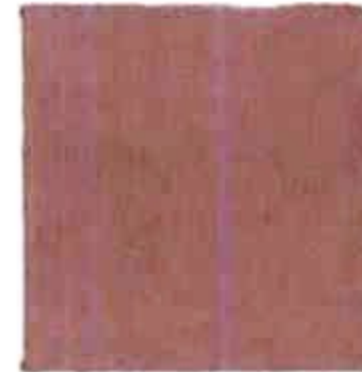



















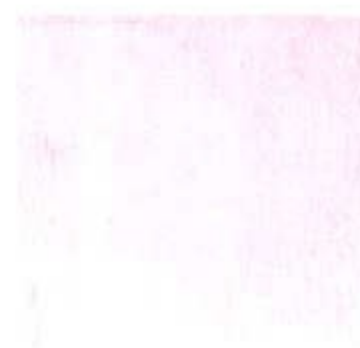















I'm sure these points must seem obvious now that I have made them, but they are important to know and remember. They will be extremely useful to have in mind as you mix and match colors for your paintings.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
	CL	CL+CY	CL+CYD	CL+YO	CL+CR	CL+TR	CL+AC	CL+TOR	CL+V	CL+CBL	CL+UBD
COLOR CHART TWO											
											
											
											
											
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
	CY	CY+CL	CY+CYD	CY+YO	CY+CR	CY+TR	CY+AC	CY+TOR	CY+V	CY+CBL	CY+UBD
COLOR CHART THREE											
											
											
											
											
COLOR CHART THREE											
COLOR CHART THREE											
COLOR CHART THREE											

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
	CYD	CYD+CL	CYD+CY	CYD+YO	CYD+CR	CYD+TR	CYD+AC	CYD+TOR	CYD+V	CYD+CBL	CYD+UBD
COLOR CHART FOUR											
CADMIUM YELLOW DEEP PREDOMINANT											
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
	YO	YO+CL	YO+CY	YO+CYD	YO+CR	YO+TR	YO+AC	YO+TOR	YO+V	YO+CBL	YO+UBD
COLOR CHART FIVE											



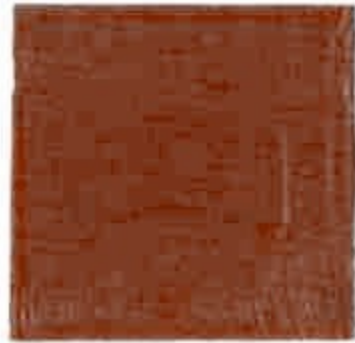



























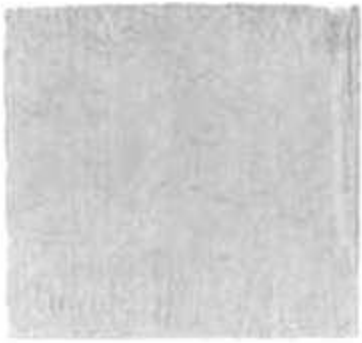
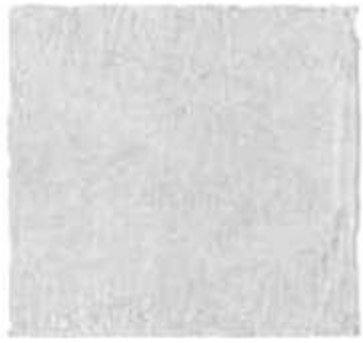












COLOR CHART
SIX

**CADMIUM
RED**
PREDOMINANT

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
CR	CR+CL	CR+CY	CR+CYD	CR+YO	CR+TR	CR+AC	CR+TOR	CR+V	CR+CBL	CR+UBD
										
										
										
										
										




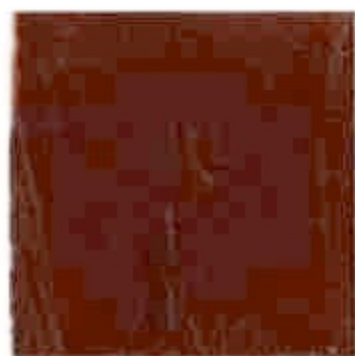




























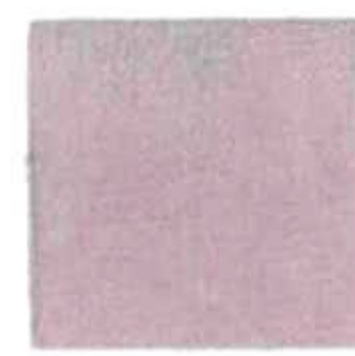

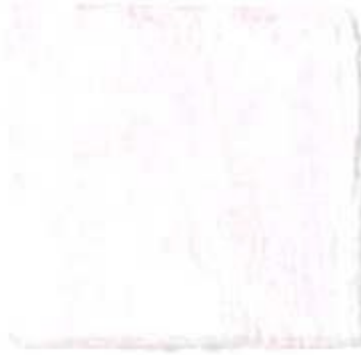
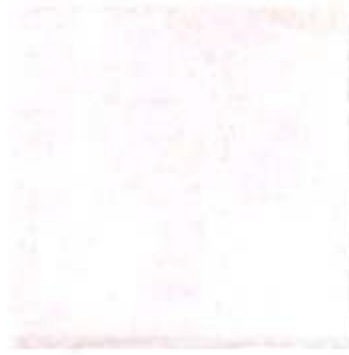


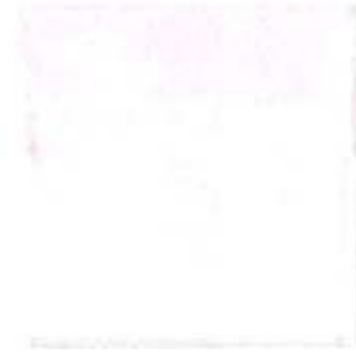


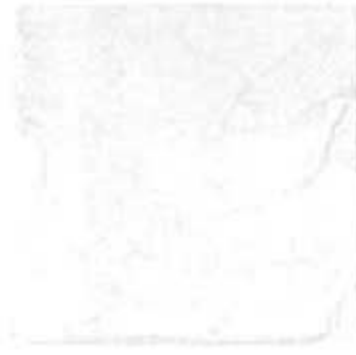













COLOR CHART
SEVEN

TERRA ROSA
PREDOMINANT

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
TR	TR+CL	TR+CY	TR+CYD	TR+YO	TR+CR	TR+AC	TR+TOR	TR+V	TR+CBL	TR+UBD
										
										
										
										





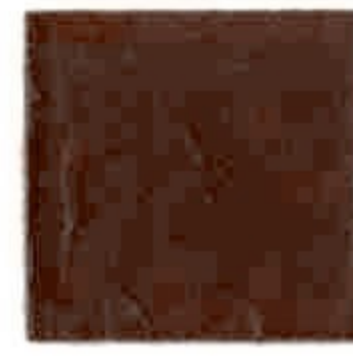

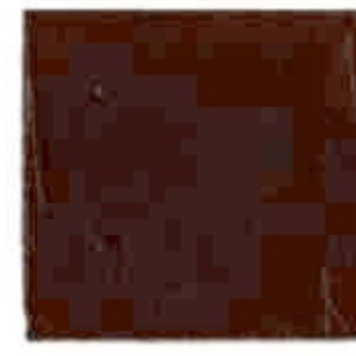
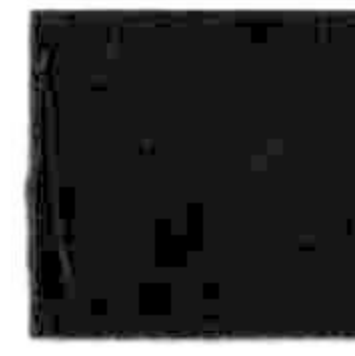















































COLOR CHART EIGHT

ALIZARIN CRIMSON
PREDOMINANT

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
AC	AC+CL	AC+CY	AC+CYD	AC+YO	AC+CR	AC+TR	AC+TOR	AC+V	AC+CBL	AC+UBD
										
										
										
										
										














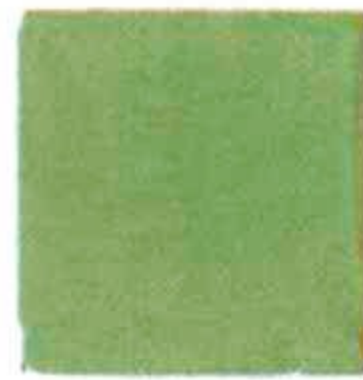















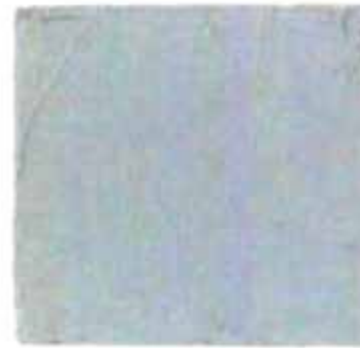


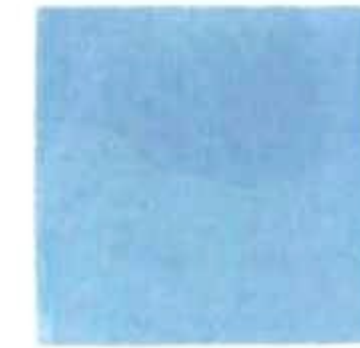







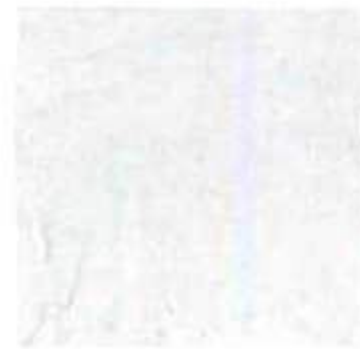
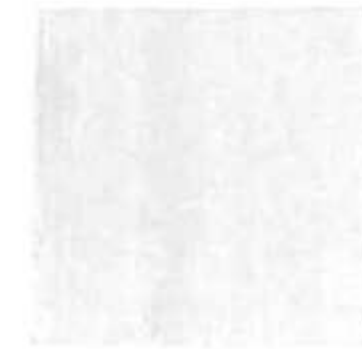













COLOR CHART NINE

TRANSPARENT OXIDE RED
PREDOMINANT

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
TOR	TOR+CL	TOR+CY	TOR+CYD	TOR+YO	TOR+CR	TOR+TR	TOR+AC	TOR+V	TOR+CBL	TOR+UBD
										
										
										
										
										





































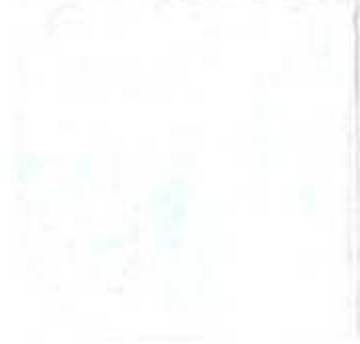







COLOR CHART
TEN

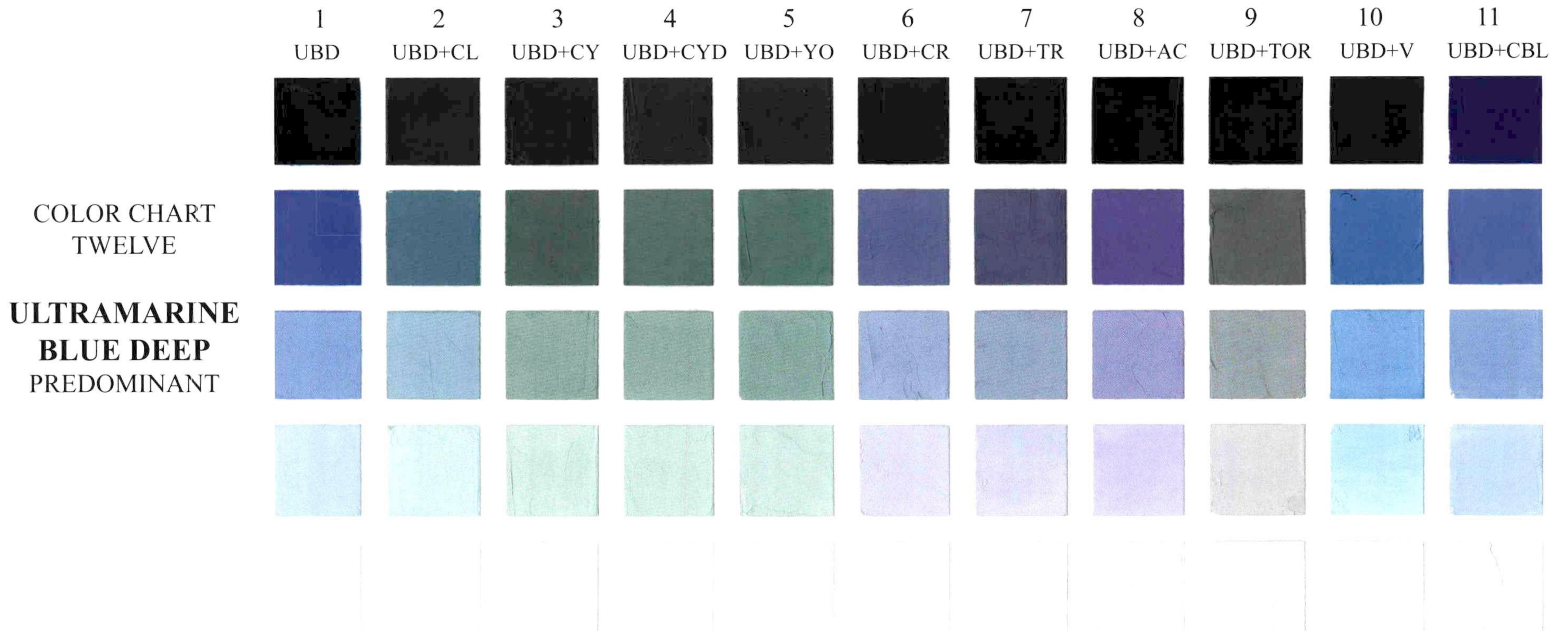
VIRIDIAN
PREDOMINANT

1 V	2 V+CL	3 V+CY	4 V+CYD	5 V+YO	6 V+CR	7 V+TR	8 V+AC	9 V+TOR	10 V+CBL	11 V+UBD
										
										
										
										
										

COLOR CHART
ELEVEN

**COBALT
BLUE LIGHT**
PREDOMINANT

1 CBL	2 CBL+CL	3 CBL+CY	4 CBL+CYD	5 CBL+YO	6 CBL+CR	7 CBL+TR	8 CBL+AC	9 CBL+TOR	10 CBL+V	11 CBL+UBD
										
										
										
										



If at this point you have finished the charts—**A BIG CONGRATULATIONS!** If you feel they are not 100% perfect, that's fine. As you can see below in the two time-worn charts from the set I did in art school sixty years ago, mine weren't masterpieces either. It is the **doing** of the charts that is so valuable, and I got better at it with each one I did. By the time I reached the last chart I was doing pretty good.

The most common errors in doing the charts are an uneven transition between the values from top to bottom, and failing to make the bottom row just barely off-white. To make corrections easier, I laid out the completed colors on my palette before applying them to the canvas or panels for permanence. It is also helpful to make one inch squares. Making them larger creates charts too cumbersome to use while painting.



OTHER GOOD THINGS TO KNOW

The first and most obvious thing you will notice after doing the charts is not only does each one appear to be an almost perfect harmony of colors (with the exception of the first chart), but each is also in harmony with at least two or more of the other charts. This is clear proof of how the ***predominance*** of a single color in all mixtures easily achieves a unifying effect, bearing in mind it is the balance of light which actually produces the dominating color when you are painting from life. It is an exaggerated effect to be sure, one the great illustrators and Masters have known and used for generations, but it is valid because it dramatically demonstrates the powerful role of a common denominator in producing color harmony.

A word of caution, however—as you read on, you will see how simply adding a selected color such as blue, for example, to all other colors does ***not*** necessarily produce the particular blue harmony you seek in the real world of painting pictures. Why? Because the ***decisive*** common denominator guiding the colors you must mix is always the ***light*** on your subject. The charts will give you the information you will need to fully understand the discussion of color harmony later in this chapter.

STILL MORE USEFUL OBSERVATIONS

1. See how the addition of white changes mixtures beyond merely lightening them. It creates new, cooler, colors.
2. Notice how certain extremely dark colors are hard to identify until white is added to them.
3. Notice how harmony among ***all*** colors increases even more with the addition of white.
4. See how most colors appear more vivid in the mid-value range.
5. Observe how some mixtures yield surprising results—for example, Viridian plus Cadmium Red (or Alizarin) produces interesting violets and purples, and many mixtures duplicate one another.
6. Notice as you work the charts, how pigments vary in transparency, opacity, tinting strength, and drying time.
7. Watch how easy it is to contaminate mixtures unless you keep your brush, your knife, and palette scrupulously clean as you work (especially with the very light mixtures).
8. Notice how simple it is with this modest palette to replicate many other colors sold in tubes. You can easily create your own Vermilion, Naples Yellow, Raw Sienna, Burnt Sienna, Burnt Umber, Raw Umber, Vandyke Brown, the Blacks, all of the Madder Lakes, Carmine, Cadmium Orange, Cerulean Blue, Prussian Blue, Permanent Blue, Turquoise, Ultramarine Violet, the Cobalt Violets, Sap Green, Olive Green, Emerald Green, Permanent Green, Sepia, English Red, Indian Red, Light Red, the Mars colors, "Flesh tints," plus every Gray available.

It's obviously unnecessary to have all pigments mentioned above on your palette, but it might be convenient to have some of them, perhaps because you use them a lot, or because some colors available today cannot be created with my palette set. For example, I add Thalo Green (yellow shade) to my palette for landscape and still life painting because Viridian is not always dark or transparent enough for my needs. I have also added Cadmium Orange, Cadmium Scarlet, and Winsor & Newton's Permanent Alizarin Crimson for more brightly colored effects. I also add Transparent Oxide Brown to my palette when I need a rich brown+blue mixture to create a warm black for my dark accents.

Please note: While I use my color selections for this text, chances are you may have a different color set you are more comfortable with. If so, I recommend making charts of those for your own benefit; you might have some pleasant surprises.

Working in a high-key is simple—just hold back all dark values in the subject, and paint the light values just as they are. Except for an accent in the model's eye, I decided not to paint anywhere darker than a #5 value. All others darker than that in the subject were raised to #5 in the painting. Working in a low-key is just the opposite—hold back on painting light values, and use the full range of darker values to develop the image. I find low-key paintings are difficult to exhibit—they require near-perfect lighting (a rarity) to view them well, and they are more prone to show the dirt and grime and wear which hanging works are subjected to over time.



HIGH KEY STUDY oil on canvas, 19 x 19, 1988

My advice (plea) to you is to do the charts for your sake. (Do not just use mine instead.) The charts are not a sure-fire gimmick guaranteed to make you a color wizard, but they are the best way I know of to understand your pigments and enter the study of color on sound footing. Take your time. Don't be in a rush just to get them done. Stay alert and aware of what is happening, not only on your palette, but within yourself—get a "feel" for your colors the way you got a *feel* for balance when you learned to ride a bicycle.

Impatience will well up, so will occasional exasperation as you make mistakes or struggle with decisions about the right color and value, but I urge you to stick with it. Perhaps in a way it is good the charts are somewhat agonizing. Nevertheless, you will develop the patience and self-discipline so necessary in painting. Think of the charts as an initiation ritual for what is to come, so you may endure them without giving up. As a dancer learns to tolerate pain and endless falls in order to some day soar with grace, so you must have the stubbornness to mix a color until it is *precisely* what you require to make your painting sing exactly as you wish.

COLOR FAMILIES

In the same way a chemistry student learns the *Table of Elements*, or a music student learns the *scales* and acquires the vital understanding of *key signatures*, so the doing of the charts taught me to recognize colors in an organized way as *families of color*. For example, my pigments *as they came from their tubes* can be understood as:

1. The **Primary** color families—**ONE** color alone—red, yellow, and blue (Cadmium Red, Cadmium Yellow Pale, and Cobalt Blue).
2. The **Secondary** color families—**TWO** primary colors mixed together—green, violet, and orange (Viridian, Cobalt Violet, Cadmium Yellow Deep).
3. The **Tertiary** color families—**ALL THREE** primary colors mixed together—all the grays, browns and earth colors (Transparent Oxide Red, Yellow Ochre, Terra Rosa).
4. The remaining pigments—Alizarin Crimson, Cadmium Lemon, and Ultramarine Blue—are clearly within the red, yellow and blue families respectively. Each, however, leans very slightly toward another color—Alizarin Crimson belongs to the red family, but has a wee bit of blue in it. Cadmium Lemon belongs to the yellow family, but inclines a teensy-weensy bit toward green. Ultramarine Blue is obviously in the blue family, but tilts just barely towards red.

So what's the point? Aren't the names of the colors on the tubes? Well, yes they are, but names can mean anything or nothing. In perusing a current catalog of artist colors, I came across the following names: Forest Green, Ice Green, Leaf Green, Rich Gold, Green Gold, Green Earth, Luminous Opera, Portrait Pink, Pacific Blue, Kings Blue, Sky Blue, Horizon Blue, and a lot more I could not even pronounce. With my apologies to any who love those colors, my question is this: could you tell what any of those colors would look like before you first unscrewed the cap and looked? I didn't think so. So much for names.

By recognizing my colors as members of *family groups*, I can understand them in a more organized and useful way. I have taken the fifteen or so colors I use and sorted them into three families. Three is easier to manage than fifteen. I like it when things are easier.

My palette, and the way I identify my colors here, is somewhat different from the description I gave in my earlier books published by Watson-Guption. What I offer here is a more comprehensive discourse, one which reflects my further adventures with color in the intervening years, and includes the minor changes and additions to my palette.



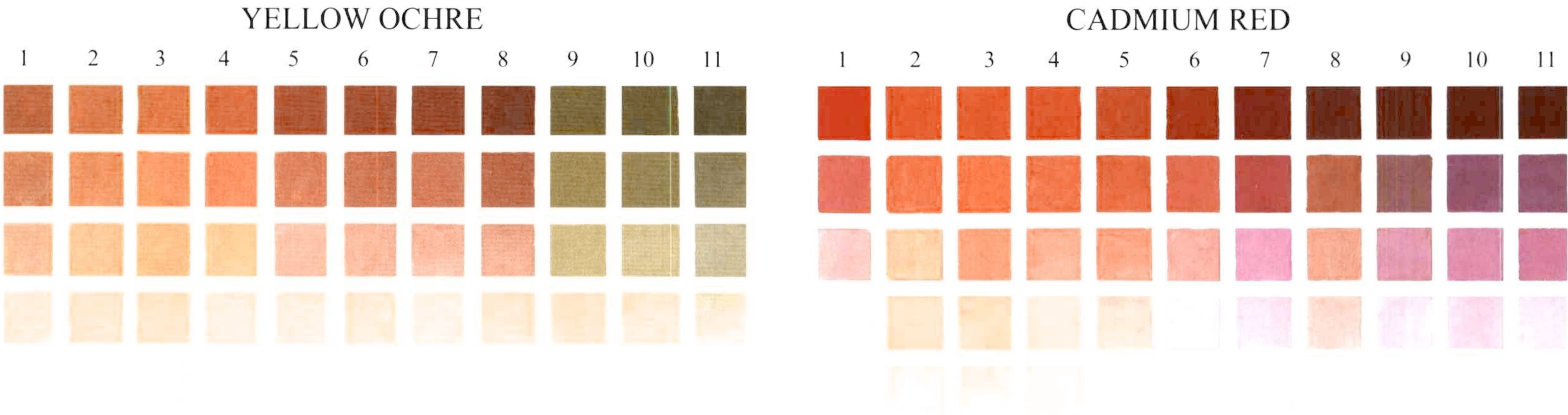
NANCY PAINTING IN THE ROCKIES oil on panel, 8 x 12, 1989

Some paintings, like this one above of Nancy, are like color charts themselves, but without the boredom of having the colors applied as a lot of identical squares. For this work I would say 98% of it was done with mixtures from the Cadmium Lemon, Cadmium Yellow Light, and Cadmium Yellow Deep charts. The few reds, blues, and Nancy's blouse came from my Basic Palette chart and the Terra Rosa chart. Few scenes are as richly harmonic as this, but whatever the subject, **it is always the color balance of the light which determines the harmony of the scene.**

In the example above, it was natural daylight, but heavily weighted with color frequencies in the yellow-green segment of the spectrum. This is a bit unusual but it happened because it was a misty morning with the sun illuminating the mist. Also, reflected light was scattered upward from the green ground cover back into the mist. It was one of those light conditions one might see in an aquarium.

PREDOMINANCE

Taking things another step, I organized the color family groups into a more specific and inclusive arrangement. The following is how I classified the little squares of chart colors into families of *predominance*. Take a look at the Yellow Ochre and Cadmium Red charts below as good examples. Despite the fact Yellow Ochre was mixed into all of the colors on that chart, only the first four columns clearly belong to the yellow family. The next four columns incline toward orange, and the last three to the green family. On the Cadmium Red chart, columns two, three, and four belong to the orange family; nine, ten, and eleven to the violet.



If you look carefully at the other charts, you will see this same presence of color families within the harmonies inherent in those charts (except chart one). In other words, while every chart but the first one is a harmony based on the dominant tone in each, individual columns within the chart can also belong to one or more color families.

I sorted out my colors so I could recognize which family a particular mixture (or a color in nature) belonged to, regardless of the chart it might be in. Many colors are virtually identical to some colors in other charts, which means there is more than just one way to arrive at the same color.

This is what I came up with, and it is how I think of color today:

1. THE RED DOMINANT FAMILY—Any mixture in which Cadmium Red, Cadmium Scarlet, Terra Rosa, or Alizarin Crimson strongly prevails.
2. THE YELLOW DOMINANT FAMILY—Any mixture in which Cadmium Lemon, Cadmium Yellow, or Yellow Ochre Light strongly prevails.
3. THE BLUE DOMINANT FAMILY—Any mixture in which Cobalt Blue or Ultramarine Blue strongly prevails.
4. THE ORANGE DOMINANT FAMILY
 - a. Any mixture in which Cadmium Orange prevails.
 - b. Any combination of the yellows and reds (to make orange) which does not clearly belong to either the red or yellow family.
 - c. Any addition of any other color to the orange mixture above, which leaves orange predominating even slightly. These are usually, but not always, tertiary mixtures.



FREYA oil on canvas, 14 x 16, 2006

5. THE GREEN DOMINANT FAMILY

- a. Any mixture in which Viridian predominates.
- b. Any combination of blues and yellows (to make green) which does not clearly belong to either the blue or yellow family.
- c. Any addition of any other color to the green mixture above, which leaves green predominating even slightly. These are usually, but not always, tertiary mixtures.

6. THE VIOLET DOMINANT FAMILY

- a. Any mixture with Cobalt Violet or other similar Violet or Purple predominant.
- b. Any mixture of the blues and reds to make violet or purple which does not clearly belong to either the blue or red family.
- c. Any addition of any other color to the violet mixture above, which leaves violet or purple predominating even slightly. These are usually, but not always, tertiary mixtures.

THE ACHROMATIC COLORS

All achromatic colors are mixtures of all three primary colors so nondescript they cannot be identified as belonging to any of the six color families described above. By definition, these are *always* tertiary mixtures, whether they come in a tube or are mixed from colors on a palette. They include a wide range of colors commonly referred to as the Browns or the Grays. The Grays are usually thought of as being the lighter values (as in gray clouds). We usually refer to the Browns as the darker nondescript colors. In real life, of course, grays and browns usually have tags on them, such as blue-gray, reddish-brown, charcoal gray, and others. Achromatic colors also come in tubes as well. Some examples are Burnt Umber, Sepia, Transparent Oxide Brown, and more.

All achromatic colors can be mixed from practically any palette having the three primary colors on it, plus white and black. From time to time, most of us create these nameless colors inadvertently as we try to match colors in a subject. It's nothing to be concerned about though, because none of this really matters. All of these colors change the way they look according to their surrounding colors anyway. It's just nice to know about.

In case you think I was (or am) a fanatic about making dry analytical lists, I'm not. In my student days, I did not take the trouble to write down these groupings as I'm doing here. I was fascinated with what was happening as I mixed my paints, and I noticed certain key things as I went along. That's all I did. I realized the charts were not some foolproof system for turning me into a color mastermind. They were an orchestration of the six fundamental colors: red, yellow, blue, violet, orange, and green. With these few pigments I could produce countless variations. *And*, I became aware of an emerging order as I was working with them.

GOOD VIBES

Each chart I completed gave me one of those electrifying "AH-HA" experiences, as in, "AH-HA so that's what blue does!" That's how green works—and so on. The simple patterns somehow clicked in my mind. It wasn't an original or particularly brilliant discovery, it was just my turn to play. I learned the immutable relationship between color and values—mainly that a color becomes a new color in the act of lightening or darkening it. I mentioned earlier that adding white to a pigment or mixture not only lightens it but changes its temperature by cooling it. This creates a new color. Using a color to darken another color does the same thing—it yields a new color. Yellow, for example, cannot simply be lightened or darkened and still remain the same yellow. It will be in the yellow family, but regardless of what I use to change its value, it will be a lesser or greater "yellow" than it was. The same goes for any other color.



LIZA oil on canvas, 20 x 16, 2005

CHAPTER NINE—COLOR HARMONY

The noun "harmony," as it refers to color, is another of the many loosely defined terms which can mean almost anything. To my late Aunt Maniac, a chair covered in chartreuse and electric purple went beautifully with her pink and silver drapes and orange rug. Most normal people, thank God, have a more restrained taste, and regard harmony simply as a "pleasing" set of colors. They have an uncomplicated notion of what-goes-with-what based on fashionable notions of what is proper.

For example—way, way, back in time in the early 1950s, when I was in high school, girls wore what were then called *matched* outfits—light pink dresses, dark pink shoes, off-white pink hats, and so on. (You could easily tell girls from boys in those days.) Automobiles were *two-toned*, light blue on top, dark blue on the bottom. Rooms had light blue-green floral wallpaper, yellow and green rugs, green-patterned upholstered furniture, and so on. Color combinations such as those were the fashions of the times. They merely reflected current ideas about what contemporary designers considered "appropriate," or to use their favorite term, "smart." I have no problem with any of that. In a way it was fun. The girls looked really cute. The color of a car meant nothing as long as I had one (it was a 1936 Pontiac, straight eight), and my Aunt Maniac was a very nice lady in spite of her quirky tastes. ***None of these notions of harmony are of any importance whatsoever in what we will be exploring here.***

Harmony, as I discuss it in this book, is an entirely different view of color harmony I described above. For our purposes (particularly in painting from life) we need a more useful grasp of what makes colors seem to belong together. We must understand how nature makes it happen, and why some colors can sometimes look all wrong in a painting. All colors in a painting, however, cannot be wrong at the same time. Usually, there are only a few culprits, and I shall tell you why.

LIGHT HARMONY IS THE THING THAT HAPPENS WHEN THE LIGHTS GO ON, WHETHER IT IS THE SUN COMING UP, OR A LIGHT SWITCH BEING FLICKED ON.

Well, what does happen? This happens: ALWAYS, whether it is the sun, the full moon, a table lamp, or even the dizzy street lights of big cities: ***the source of light, or any combination of sources, produces a predominating effect influencing the color of everything in sight.*** The color of the light acts as a common denominator to visually unite everything it illuminates.

THEREFORE, LIGHT PRODUCES HARMONY IN A SUBJECT. (And don't forget it!)

Local colors illuminated under the same light source, or combinations of sources, absorb and reflect the wavelengths of light they receive in direct proportion to the distribution of color radiating from the light source. Because of that, the colors of things in the visual field appear to mutually reinforce one another. This constitutes an order—a relationship which unites colors, and also which is what I refer to hereafter as harmony.

By the way, it is irrelevant to the fact of harmony whether or not a particular one is pleasing to you. A harmonious color relationship, as I define it, does not come with a guarantee you will enjoy it. Enjoyment or dislike of colors is a purely emotional response you and I have—a value judgment if you will. The "strip" in Las Vegas may give you the screaming meemies (or, God forbid, you may like it), but it is still a harmony of sorts—and harmony, pleasing or repulsive, is what makes things look normal. If, under Las Vegas' glaring lights, people looked as if they were in soft romantic candlelight, you might think you were going batty. Why? Because it could not possibly happen, given the lights there. As you paint, if you change the colors you see to make them more pleasing to yourself, that is your choice as an artist, but they might not necessarily match the actual colors in the subject.



WILDFLOWERS oil on panel, 8 x 12, 2009

I set the tone for the harmony in this little sketch by applying a turpentine wash of Thalo Green and Yellow Ochre over the entire panel. (This panel is 1/4 inch untempered Masonite sized with rabbit skin glue, and primed with a white lead ground.) I enhanced the richness of the greenish wash by applying it unevenly, making it slightly lighter and darker, and varying the green by adding Cadmium Yellow Deep and Cadmium Orange here and there, but never enough to seriously disturb the dominance of green. From that preparation it was relatively easy to first establish the green foliage, and after that, to lay in my big punches with Cadmium Orange, Cadmium Yellow Deep, and Cadmium Red.

From the fact that light produces color harmony, (whether it pleases you or not), I made the inference that light itself does not lighten or darken without also changing its apparent color! That was an astounding idea—a Law of Nature (Richard's Law?). It explained the world of color to me so simply!

I realized color was like silly putty—I couldn't move it around or even look at it without changing it. Why? Because moving it changed it *relative* to the colors it (and I) was moving within, and the light I used to see it with *made* it look the way it did. Doing the charts showed me dramatically how colors are transformed by surrounding colors—even how white, unmixed, takes on the blush of its neighbors.

In school and for a long time afterward, the charts were always at my side when I painted. I referred to them constantly as I tried to match the colors in my subjects. It was wonderful to be able to glance at the model, then down at a chart, and instantly be able to identify the families of colors I was seeing—and then to know exactly what mixtures made those colors! The charts became as familiar to me as the scales I played on my piano. They were my well-worn secret friends.

It wasn't long until I had internalized the information in the charts. In current parlance you could say I downloaded the data files into my brain's hard drive. I can now see whole combinations of colors and automatically recognize them, the same way I can tell flavors by their taste. Today I can look at a patch of grass in the sun, for example, and instead of thinking, "Gee whiz! Look at the lovely green," I automatically recognize it as probably Viridian with Cadmium Yellow Pale, plus White, at about a number four value, with Viridian predominating. In the same way I now see an edge as a specific type of brushstroke, I see a color as first belonging to a family, then a specific combination of pigments within the family. In other words, I recognize a family of color immediately, then which other color it leans toward, and how dark or light it is. I know this kind of thinking doesn't sound very thrilling or "arty," but it certainly leads to satisfyingly authentic color. It's a lot more useful than seeing a color and just thinking how nice it is.



BROWN EYED SUSANS oil on canvas, 8 x 16, 2008



KING RICHARD'S FAIRE (Detail), oil on panel, 8 x 14, 1990

THE DYNAMICS OF HARMONY

If any light source on a subject changes significantly, or a new one is introduced, the overall harmony changes. Every source of light, natural or artificial, has a specific balance of colors. Some light is very blue, some is loaded with yellow, some may be more orange, and so on. Often, single light sources cause strikingly obvious harmonious effects. (A red sky at sunset, for example, or the orange glow of a fireplace, or moonlight.) Less "pleasing" harmonies (but harmonies nevertheless) occur under sodium vapor or mercury vapor street illumination. (They tend to be severely monochromatic, and they make you look strangely sick.)

Harmony then is not, "what goes with what?" It is more like "What color doesn't belong?"—WHAT ISN'T POSSIBLE UNDER THIS LIGHT? Certain colors simply cannot occur under given light conditions. The more limited a light spectrum is, the fewer colors there will be, and therefore, the stronger and more obvious the harmony will appear. For example, a light source which puts out only one color, such as the red safelight in a darkroom, will make most things look red. (Except red objects, which will appear white because they *reflect* nearly 100% of the light, and green objects will look black because they *absorb* 100% of the light—no kidding, try it.)

PROVE IT TO YOURSELF

Make this simple test. Get some colored cellophane or colored glass (camera filters work nicely), and look at familiar scenes through it. You can also go to a drugstore or supermarket and try on all the different sunglasses you can (especially the red, yellow, or blue ones)—then notice how the different tints of the sunglasses seem to transform the colors (and values) of things in the store. See how colors "come together" and seem to participate in a single common color. (Do not wear the blue or green sunglasses if you intend to buy groceries, especially meat.)

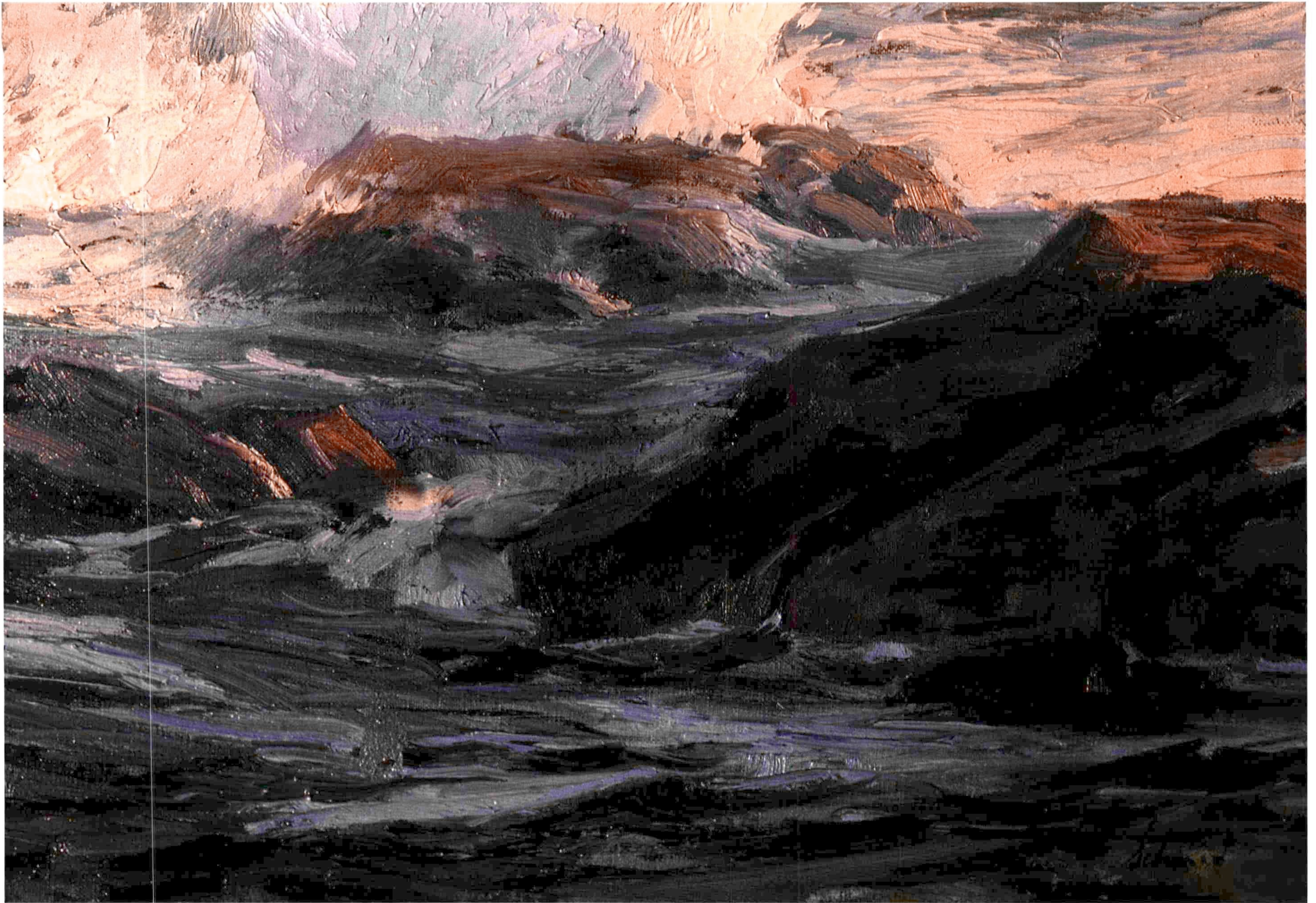
What is happening is this—in looking through the colored glass or cellophane you are effectively replicating what nature does with light—you are filtering out some frequencies of the spectrum and allowing others to come through. You might regard this little exercise as an exaggeration of how nature behaves, but it isn't. The range of color circumstances nature can provide us with is infinitely more than we could ever hope to duplicate with man-made filters.

TO ACHIEVE HARMONY IN A PAINTING, IT IS USUALLY ONLY NECESSARY TO RECOGNIZE THE COLOR PREDOMINATING IN THE LIGHT ILLUMINATING YOUR SUBJECT, AND THEN RESTRAIN ITS COMPLEMENT.

You will remember how the root meaning of the word *complement* is "to complete." (As opposed to *compliment*, which is a word of praise.) So we know the complement of red is green. Why does green complete anything? Well, because green is a mixture of yellow and blue, so red plus its complement, green, means we now have red, yellow, and blue, all three primary colors together. Doing this completes the Primary Triad—red, yellow, and blue—now a complete *complement*.

By "restrain" a color I do not mean eliminate it. Nothing quite as drastic, please. I just mean subdue it a bit by not showing it in its purest form. At first glance, this may sound like a rule, but in fact it is simply a guideline based on the natural action of light. In warm light, for example, blues will probably contain at least some red or yellow, thus appearing less blue—how much less blue depends on how warm the light is. The judgment is entirely up to you. However, knowing certain colors will probably have to be moderated to achieve a harmony will help your decision making.

Your perception and evaluations (and mine too) are a part of the equation, but there is no formula for it, because it is something purely personal. I mentioned earlier in this book about Monet and Renoir painting the same subjects at the same time. Renoir's harmonies were more blue and green; Monet's leaned slightly toward blue-violet. Both look superbly authentic. The necessary subjectivity is obviously always a vital ingredient in creating art. Without it, there would be no art.



WASHERWOMAN ROCKS oil on canvas, 12 x 16, Isle of Monhegan, 1964

This extraordinary capture of a crashing wave is extraordinary because I painted it while viewing it through a pair of binoculars, so for the most part, it was a one-handed painting. Waiting for just the right moment of sunlight, I had set up my easel on one of Monhegan Island's cliffs. The binoculars were necessary because the rocks in those Atlantic waters were at least three or four hundred yards from me, and I needed the magnification in order to see the specific drawing, color changes, and edges.

THE COMPLEMENTS OF PRIMARY AND SECONDARY COLORS ARE:

<i>Color</i>	<i>Complement</i>	<i>Color</i>	<i>Complement</i>
RED.....	GREEN	GREEN	RED
YELLOW.....	VIOLET	VIOLET	YELLOW
BLUE	ORANGE	ORANGE	BLUE

Let us suppose, for example, you are setting up to paint in your north light studio and the sky outside your window is a deep clear blue. This produces light which is very cool, and definitely on the blue side. It means all mixtures of orange (the complement of blue) will probably have to contain at least traces of blue (or green or violet) to produce the appropriate harmony. If you are working with light which is predominantly orange or yellow (such as in tungsten lamps), the blue family will be correspondingly less "blue." Such extremes of color saturation of the light are fairly easy to identify.

WHAT IF YOU CAN'T IDENTIFY THE PREDOMINANT COLOR IN THE LIGHT?

Good question! Sometimes we paint under conditions in which our light source is so evenly balanced, it lacks a clearly identifiable color harmony or temperature. Under such average light conditions, the ambient harmony is not well pronounced because the color of the light is not clearly weighted toward any single color. In these situations, you need only pinpoint the TEMPERATURE of the light and then stay within it to achieve an effect that appears credible. (It means, for example, in north daylight keeping your shadows warmer than the light areas, and doing the opposite in warm light.)

Once you have determined the temperature of the light, be careful to scrupulously maintain not only the appropriate relationship (cool lights, warm shadows, for example), but also the *degree* of temperature difference between the light and shadow throughout the painting. (*How* warm the shadows are compared to the light areas.) This will give your color work a solidly authentic look. An arbitrary deviation from the temperature relationship will produce a weak and ambiguous effect.

MUD COLOR

If you know you have mixed the right color families for an area of your painting, but the colors still look "wrong," it is invariably because they are not the correct *temperature* for the harmony you are working in. "Muddy" color, for example, is simply a color inappropriate in temperature—as when you place a cool color in what should be a warm shadow on your painting. The only other cause I can think of for a color looking "wrong" is simply that it is incorrect in value (too light or too dark compared to what is on your subject). If this is so, make sure the color you correct it *with* is consistent with the temperature which must be maintained. For example, if you are darkening a color in a warm shadow, don't use blue or any other color too cool.

Any departure from the temperature structure you have decided upon must be done for a good reason and with deliberate intent if you want your picture to look faithful. You must know why and to what exact purpose you are stepping outside the bounds of the temperature system you are working with. When you *do* know *what* you are doing and *why* you are doing it, you can reverse the temperature relationship with stunning effect—a trick the great illustrators used whenever they could get away with it.

N.C. Wyeth, for example, loved to put a hot yellow-orange light within a cool blue painting—as when he painted a candlelit window at night. Frederic Remington did it nicely too when he gave us the fiery yellow discharge of a gunshot in cool moonlight. John Singer Sargent enjoyed the temperature intricacies of the highlights and shadows in the satin gowns worn by many of his sitters. The Dutch painters discovered those same delightful color reversals 200 years before Sargent.



LIGHT STUDY oil on canvas, 16 x 18, 1990

Such flourishes look convincing because they actually do occur in the subject, but other liberties are possible even when they don't happen naturally. Remember though, all of these manipulations look authentic only when the overall harmony in a picture is sound and the anomaly makes sense as a believable part of the subject.

HOW TO REALLY MESS UP HARMONY

Perhaps the oldest, most time-honored, seemingly most plausible (and wrong) method of creating a harmonious color relationship is the practice of premixing a single color into every other color on the palette before starting a painting. At first glance this idea seems to make sense. If the light is bluish, for example, then blue must be in every color on the subject. Right? So if blue is premixed into every color to be used, a harmony (so the theory goes) will naturally and automatically result. Another variation on this system (still using blue as an example) is to mix blue into the pile of white to be used. Since white is used in so many mixtures in a typical painting, the presumption is the blue (already mixed into the white) will somehow work its way onto the canvas in the course of mixing, and thus create a harmony. The reason these two systems fail is a true harmony requires different amounts of the key color for each and every mixture in a painting, and there is no way to predict it in advance.

Still another incredibly tedious method (I've seen this many times) involves mixing *all* the anticipated shades of color to be used in a painting *before* putting them on the canvas. This is an attempt to create a harmonious selection of colors on the palette even before a picture is started. A procedure like that not only requires a huge palette surface to contain the scheduled colors, but it also takes seemingly forever to mix them. It also fails for the same reason as above. Mixing colors on a palette is one thing, but exactly how they will look placed among the other colors in a complex painting is not predictable. As if that were not enough, the first colors mixed often dry out, or the model leaves to find a better job before the whole set is finished and a single brushstroke laid to canvas.

Color systems have been around as long as there have been colors to paint with and light to see by. The dream of many is to find something like an equation, a simple procedure, perhaps a pattern, or at least a definable relationship which all situations of light and subject might share in common, and which could be methodized. The best they have come up with are various color selections which select one primary or secondary color, plus a few closely related neighboring colors, and reject the other colors in the spectrum. There are also the various color charts and wheels (dial-a-harmony gadgets) available at an art superstore or online. Alas, the search for El Dorado or the Holy Grail has better prospects for success.

The problem with all of this well-meaning fuss is it simply doesn't work, at least not in painting from life. The reason it doesn't work is because replicating the harmony is not a simple matter of following a system. Harmony involves a complex interplay between the behavior of light and the experienced mind of the artist. It is a dance, if you will, like the tango—without rules, yet a beautiful counterpoint nevertheless. It is not a one-size-fits-all equation such as $E=mc^2$. It is an interaction in which the step-by-step judgment on the part of the painter is crucial. Like climbing a mountain, it has to be done one careful step at a time. It is a process by which we must *compare* each separate color, as we mix and apply it, to all others which have gone before it. The process is a constant and meticulous decision making activity that must take place one color at a time throughout the entire course of a painting.

The harmonies we need to produce in working from life do not arise from methods I have just described, or any others I know of. Systems promising this might produce a pleasant harmony, but it will not bring about THE harmony that truly matches the way you see your subject. No system or device (even the marvelous computer I am using to write this) can anticipate all the colors in advance that will be needed in a painting. (The computer can't do it because it can't be programmed to see as you or I see.)



VISITOR (Detail), oil on panel, 12 x 16, 1987

There are many other harmony schemes, such as reduction systems involving questionable mathematical relationships of colors on the color wheel or the spectrum. The fun ones to argue about are various other quirky approaches embracing theories about the psychological or spiritual properties of color. My personal loony award goes to the harebrained notions about the mystical and occult nature of color. Believe me when I advise you to stay away from all of these notions. You don't need to paint when the moon is full, or have incense burning in your studio while mumbling incantations, or follow some guaranteed formula to have a valid color harmony happen. Rely on what you know you can depend upon. Put your trust in the plain simple know-how that comes from studying what happens when you mix your colors together.

The Masters' grasp of color harmony resulted from their understanding of the same few basic principles of color behavior I have outlined in the more serious part of this discussion. These are sound observations about light and color because they are true and verifiable, and they can work for you. Think clearly and paint the colors you see as accurately as you possibly can. The result is bound to be harmonious.

THE OTHER MEANING OF HARMONY

So far, I have been dealing with harmony defined as an order arising from qualities in light, but "harmony" also describes color arrangements we invent. We do this in our daily routines constantly, sometimes without even being aware we are doing it. Whether it is picking out the right tie to wear or gathering objects and backgrounds for a still life, we are to some extent seeking a combination of colors we find satisfying. More often than not, we have something specific in mind, other times we try this and that randomly until something clicks, but as long as we have choices, we will always be selective unless we flip a coin—and even deciding to do that is a deliberate choice.

We painters cannot afford a hit-or-miss method of selection because rendering a particular color arrangement is crucial to the effectiveness of our work. When we are choosing and arranging things for a picture, such as a still life, we have almost unlimited creative latitude. (As opposed to painting what nature offers, as in landscape painting, where certain requisites attend.) Therefore, I believe it is important for us to give ourselves as much freedom of choice as possible.

What does it all mean? Freedom to me is access to fresh choices, which means having the ability to disengage from external influences I allow to control me. What are those inhibiting influences? Mainly they are the traditional, well-established ideas about what "good" color combinations are, particularly the wonderful color achievements of the Masters. I'm not dismissing them, of course. Many of our artistic color preferences are deeply fixed in our minds precisely because we admire them so in the works of painters we wish to emulate. Studying the works of artists who are imaginative and skillful with color is a vital part of the learning process. Most of us go through this naturally, and it is a healthy thing. Eventually, however, a time comes when we must be imaginative and skillful in our own right.

I can't tell you exactly how to do that. No one can. It is bound up in the wonderful mystery of creativity itself. I can only advise two things. The first is to fall back on the old dictum, "Know thyself." Cultivate an awareness of your unique preferences, and consider color from the standpoint of how you want it to function in the context of what you intend to convey in your art (rather than how other people will judge it against a norm).

Second, there does exist a splendid and limitless source of inspiration. If you are looking for a truly authentic-sure fire-never-fail example of creating harmony, look to nature! Study her fascinating color patterns and use them as references when you are setting up a subject. Keep your eyes open for the color combinations in leaves and rocks and little bugs, and so on. Keep notes or start a file on the things that catch your eye. Nature is a marvelous kaleidoscope of ever-new chromatic delights. It is all there for all to use and enjoy.



RANCH HAND oil on canvas, 20 x 20, 1993

"PURE COLOR" PAINTING

Who among us has not gazed lovingly at the brilliant colors on a palette and wished to use them just as they came from their tubes—pure and unsullied—instead of degraded by intermixing with themselves? Well, theoretically at least, any subject can be painted with pure unblended primary and secondary colors alone (plus white), without the deliberate use of any "grays" (tertiary colors—mixing red, yellow and blue together), and still look perfectly correct—not artificial or forced. That is, after all, how nature does it (mostly, however, on a microscopic level). Achieving this was the goal of some, but by no means all, of the French Impressionists.

To produce their striking color effects, many of them employed the now familiar technique of applying small bits of pigment laid side by side on the canvas as what we call today *broken color*. The idea was, and still is, to let the eye of the observer blend them to form new colors. A painting must be viewed from a certain minimum distance for it to happen (about six to eight feet). Monet, Manet, Sisley, Pissarro (and many others, including painters elsewhere in Europe, North America, and Australia) brought the broken color method to a high level of sophistication. Many still equate Impressionism with originating broken color painting in the mid 1800s. However, those techniques were already emerging as far back as Velázquez and Hals—two centuries before the French Impressionists.

Regardless of who invented broken color, no one has yet been entirely successful in attaining a completely natural looking result with it. By this I mean impressionistic broken color paintings are (by definition) departures from the way most humans see the world. If you or I actually saw things entirely as discrete patches of exaggerated color, it would indicate some form of visual impairment. We do not normally see colors that way; we see them as *already* blended, which is why broken color painting has been described as "*nothing up close, but everything from a distance*." We normally see green as green, not yellow and blue. (We must be trained to see it separated this way.) I do not suggest any criticism here of the Impressionists' efforts, but I do mean to point out certain aspects inherent in any broken color technique. In any case, I love it and use it a lot.

In practice, a successful representational painting done strictly in pure spectrum colors (plus white) is extremely demanding. In my experience it is by far the most difficult of all methods of painting because of the very high level of control which must be maintained. In the attempt, there are inevitable problems with the other visual elements that make things look real to us, particularly edges, values, and usually drawing.

THE COMPROMISE

In a pure broken color application, the opportunity for virtuoso brushwork is often unavoidably sacrificed. So too, subtle and accurate drawing is sometimes surrendered. In the need to be more colorful, and therefore lighter, the full range of values also suffers. (Impressionistic paintings often tend to be "high-key" renderings.) This value deficit is clearly seen in many broken color works when they are reproduced in black and white.

Even where there is no intention to bother with drawing, value, or edges (as in Monet's later works), the results are rarely, if ever, pure color paintings. Nearly all impressionistic painters eventually resort to grays to get their final effects, or grays appear in the blending that occurs (intentionally or otherwise) in the normal course of painting. Again, please do not take these comments as any disapproval of Impressionism. Any serious effort toward brilliant color is more than worthwhile, and altering values or colors to produce special effects of light or mood is one of our most cherished techniques. It would be sad not to pursue color to its fullest.

The point is this—when I "push" my color and change values, I am then outside the bounds of the way things "ordinarily" appear. This means that I am in an area where the only reference (or criterion) I have is whether I like the way the painting looks. I can no longer compare it to the subject for correctness since I have deliberately departed from the natural appearance of the subject. In such a case I must be very careful because it is all too easy to lose control and spill over into flamboyantly impossible color and ineffective value relationships.



LILIES AND LEMONS oil on canvas, 22 x 28, 1977

MY CHOICE

Simply making every color I put down as purely (unmixed) as possible does not automatically produce a splendid result. When all colors in a painting are equally pure and brilliant, the effect can often be less colorful than when one or two colors predominate as pure colors. I have come to realize Mother Nature, though she starts with pure color at the most elemental level, nevertheless reaches us as complex frequencies which are usually best represented as pigment mixtures.

My usual personal preference, and you may regard this as my opinion, not necessarily advice, is to try to use the complete range of pictorial elements if I can, unless there is a good reason (such as artistic choice) not to. I prefer a painting that is fascinating in all respects—drawing, edges, and values, as well as color. To achieve this, some compromise with color is usually necessary.

For example, to get the deep values I want, I must accept some sacrifice of brilliant color in the darks. I can't have both at the same time—dark color and vivid color together—that is an inherent limitation of paint. I find very deep dark accents, however lacking in identifiable color (but which have a strong temperature), tend to magnify the richness of middle-tone colors, as well as the delicacy of high-keyed colors.

There is no question about the power of grays to enhance the more pure colors—that is why a single neon sign stands out when seen alone apart from other lights, and why it does not stand apart when everything is neon. In the end, of course, what matters is how well your color serves your artistic intentions.

Lest I sound as if I'm throwing cold water on pure color painting, when it works it is glorious! Walking through an exhibition of virtuoso Impressionistic painting is like walking in sunshine. The attempt to keep color clean and strong is worth every effort. Even when a pure color painting falls short of its goal or sinks into improbable tonality, it is at least more fun to look at than a work safely rendered in dull browns and grays.

SOME NICE EXTRAS

It is possible to enhance the appearance of paint mixtures by avoiding the habit of overmixing. Colors mixed too thoroughly lack the brilliance of more loosely blended paint. When tiny pigment particles are slightly separated, individual brushstrokes take on a scintillation similar to impressionistic broken color painting, which is why it is a good idea to clean your palette often and mix fresh piles of paint frequently. Rinse your brush well between all strokes, and try not to go over them except to modify their edges.

Mixing paint directly on the canvas instead of the palette is another way to achieve a casually mixed color effect. It isn't always possible, particularly where drawing is critical, but it can be done successfully in larger areas. In landscape painting, I often paint broad sections, such as the sky, with a single layer of white and then apply other mixtures into it right on the canvas.

Making use of the transparency of paint can also add immeasurably to the surface luster of a picture. I prefer to apply all of my darks very thinly when I can, particularly when those darks occur as shadow areas in the subject. Pigments used transparently have an optical quality quite different from their opaque state. When they are employed together—transparently in darks, heavily opaque in the light areas—the three-dimensional effect is magnified. Applying darks thinly also eliminates the annoying glare of brushmarks in areas which ought to remain quiet. I hasten to add that applying darks does not necessarily mean thinning them with medium. Very thin applications can also be made by scumbling the paint on without the use of a medium.

If you really wish to get fancy, and you are working *alla prima* (wet-into-wet), try brushing transparent paint on top of opaque paint. There is only allowance for *one slow swipe* of the brush, which means no room for corrections, but the resulting color will be similar to the gleam of opal or mother-of-pearl. You might also try placing more than one color on your brush or palette knife, then make your stroke—carefully. These are both one-shot hit-or-miss artifices and the odds are not good you will succeed on the first attempt, but they are definitely impressive when they work. One caution, however, do not get too involved in such flourishes until you first master the basics of simply matching colors. Tricks are fun but they are not a substitute for professional skill.



RICHARD'S FLIGHT oil on canvas, 19 x 25, Salmagundi Club Demonstration, New York, 2010

To see the dramatic effect light has on color harmony, compare the colors I used in the painting above, which was done under cool lighting, to the next painting of oranges on page 251, which was painted under a hot floodlight. The objects are nearly identical but what a difference!!

This doesn't come under the heading of fancy tricks, but one of the best pieces of advice I can give is to keep your palette clean and orderly. When I see students struggling with badly colored paintings, invariably their palettes and brushes are just as messy. Lay your colors out in a sensible order, and with generous amounts of paint. Have one or more large containers of mineral spirits or turpentine near so you can keep your brushes clean as you work. Whatever technical stumbling blocks you might have with color, don't make things more difficult by not having something as easy to acquire as good working habits.

SUMMING UP

1. Color is one of our more powerful tools, but its richly complex and relativistic nature makes it difficult to understand and use.
2. The colors of things look the way they do because of the light on them, the influence of surrounding colors, and their local pigmentation.
3. A color changes its appearance when either the light changes or its adjacent colors change.
4. The limitations of paint prevent us from duplicating the actual brilliance in nature.
5. Factors such as our emotional responses to color, our preconceived notions, and misinformation about it, interfere with our objective perception of color.
6. In spite of its complexity, color can be understood rationally and used effectively. Three things are necessary to do this. First, identify the color you are seeing; second, mix it correctly (so it matches what you have seen); and third, put it in the right place on your painting.
7. The pigments we use to paint with act by reflecting light. Therefore, we cannot match the brightness of certain things in nature (particularly light sources). To compensate for this we can only paint the relative brightness of light sources compared to other things in the visual field. This usually requires rendering a light source in the subject as the lightest light in a picture.
8. White paint is technically the coolest pigment; therefore, when we add white to any mixture, the resulting color is cooler.
9. Understanding the phenomenon of color temperature is the key to controlling color. All colors manifest a changeable property called temperature. Colors in a painting appear either warmer or cooler (or hotter or colder) depending upon the temperatures of their adjacent colors. The apparent temperature of any pigment color or pigment mixture changes when lightened or darkened, when any other pigment is introduced into the color or color mixture, or when surrounding colors on a painting are altered. The apparent temperature of any color in a subject likewise shifts when the light on it changes or when bordering colors change (as when you alter the background in your subject, or clouds shift in the landscape).
10. When you work, try to have the same light on your subject, your palette, and your painting.
11. The temperature (or color) of the ambient light is the single most powerful factor in causing the colors on a subject to look the way they do. You can determine the temperature by comparing the light on a subject to its shadows. Warm light produces cool shadows, and cool light yields warm shadows.
12. I recommend doing a series of color charts (as previously described) to understand the capabilities and qualities of your pigments. Doing the charts will also teach you to identify colors in your subject and accurately mix the color you see with the least amount of trial and error. It is also a good idea to make a color chart whenever you introduce a new pigment on your palette.



DELFT BOWL AND ORANGES oil on canvas, 17 x 21, Master's Demonstration, Laguna Beach, 2010

13. Keep your palette simple. Have the fewest colors necessary for the way you paint. I also recommend keeping your palette orderly. Lay the colors out in a logical sequence and in sufficient quantity. Don't be stingy with your paint, and try to keep the piles clean (dip into them with a clean brush or knife). Remember Richard's Law of Creeping Color—What is on your palette will probably end up on your canvas. See that you clean your mixing surface frequently to avoid dirty mixtures. Have plenty of rags or highly absorbent paper towels on hand and use them lavishly.
14. Color harmony as it should concern painters is not simply a pleasing selection of colors. In painting from life, oddly theoretical systems of color mixing or predetermined color schemes cannot produce an authentic version of the harmony in a subject. Why? Because you cannot predict all the colors you will need in a painting. No system can take into account the factor of you as the perceiver of your subject.
15. The main source of color harmony is the light on a subject.
16. The light on your subject rarely has equal amounts of colors in its spectrum—which means your light will be weighted toward blue, or orange, or some other color. That, in turn, means some other color or colors in the spectrum are going to be either absent or diminished. If the light is strongly blue, for example, it follows that red and yellow in their purest form will be proportionally minimized. These absent or diminished colors need only be restrained, not eliminated entirely from your color mixtures, to duplicate the harmony in the subject. (This, by the way, is not a scheme or system. It is merely a description of how light works and how to cooperate with it.)
17. Light of a single strong color presents a relatively easy problem in achieving a harmony. Having the same success with more evenly balanced light takes somewhat more care and considerable experience, but the principle is the same.
18. Pure color painting requires the highest degree of control because it involves changing (usually exaggerating) the colors you see. Greens, for example, are often broken into their constituent yellows and blues, violets into bits of blue and red, and so on. Values as well are changed, typically a tightening of the darks to make their color more brilliant. The risk in all of this is that the process can so easily slip over into gaudy superficiality. It's worth the risk, however, and if it doesn't work, you can always start over.
19. Stay away from crackpot, short-cut-sure-fire schemes to obtain "good" color. Stick to the wise old-fashioned method of understanding your paints and developing a sharp eye for color. Learn from the Masters—it's all there in their paintings. Do your own dance.

BON APPETIT!

So ends our discussion about this thing called color—this magnificent, often vexing, yet always breathtaking, gift to our senses. Give it your patience, your devotion, and never stop trying to make it shine in your paintings. Treat it as your secret loved one, and it will shower your efforts with more beauty than you can imagine.



BLUE CUP AND PANSIES oil on canvas, 10 x 13, 2012

CHAPTER TEN—COMPOSITION

The instant you make a mark on a surface such as a canvas or piece of paper, you create a COMPOSITION. If you place your mark at dead center, the effect is *symmetrical*. If you put it anywhere else, it is not. That is called *asymmetrical*. If you do it with calculated thought, it is called *designing*. It's boring stuff when put like that, but upon this simple stuff rests the vast body of theory and canons of composition. Except for *Abstraction*, nothing in painting is more controversial or difficult to define than composition. We all think we recognize a good one when we see it (or create one ourselves), but we do not always agree with others about their choices, or even what constitutes a good composition. One that gives you thrilling goose bumps might bore me, and vice versa.

To make matters worse, we are given theories and rules about composition (many of them contradictory) and then told to forget the rules and "do your own thing." This is what I will be saying as well in this chapter, because designing from my personal viewpoint is the only way I know how to make a composition satisfying to me.

I want to emphasize: there is a big *however* regarding the *doing of my own thing*. In my case I first had to study the various classical elements of design and the ideas behind them in order to learn what was already known, or at least what thoughts about composition and design accomplished artists have given us either through their works or by teaching. Most of what I learned occurred in the years after art school. (There I was more concerned about learning to paint well.) My lengthy wanderings through the study and pedagogy of composition was an amazing experience, one which continues to this day. In the remainder of this chapter, I present that journey and my thoughts about what I learned. I also present images by other artists of some of their compositions that influenced my development.

WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT

In this discussion I do not deal with composition and design in a general way, rather I present it mostly as it applies to painting from life. Remember this as you read because there is a *big* difference. Design in the pure sense starts with nothing, and creates something. Typically, an artist begins with a blank drawing or painting surface (the *tabula rasa*), and then makes marks of some sort, or applies paint upon the surface with the hope of getting someone's attention and perhaps conveying something of interest to them. It is quite another story in painting from life. Our creativity usually begins with what already exists, such as a landscape or a person, any subject sparking an idea. We then choose aspects, or viewpoints, of our selected subject, or we arrange elements from it to make our pictures (as in a still life).

In working from life, our creativity lies in the fact we are (I trust) highly *selective* in our choices of what to paint. Unlike the person who takes snapshots simply to record something, we painters scan what is before us for its design possibilities. We look for a view that will employ the visual elements in a scene in such a way as to enhance the thing we are interested in depicting. If we are arranging things to paint (as in setting up a still life or a model), we select our subject matter and viewpoint in the same way. Sometimes it is easy, sometimes not. Often a subject bears a design so obvious and compelling we can't go wrong. Other times we agonize over how to paint something interestingly.

WHY COMPOSITION DRIVES US NUTS

You wouldn't think the simple act of arranging shapes in a picture could be in any way confusing or challenging, but it is. We have all felt that strain at one time or another. Often, instead of just doing what pleases us, we get sidetracked. We tend to be particularly hard on ourselves by scrutinizing our painting for "correct" composition. We worry about whether it "balances," or if it has "unity," or "movement." We ponder such notions as negative space, aesthetic centers, lines of direction, dynamic spatial relationships, connecting patterns, dominant shapes, focal points, rhythm, emphasis, convergence, divergence, and on and on.



ANTIQUE MIRROR oil on canvas, 22 x 26, 1995

You will note such words and phrases represent **abstract** ideas, whereas an actual composition is made up of **tangible** pigment on a physical surface. Abstractions (as I am fond of pointing out) are tricky to define, and I think it would be wiser to be more specific when we get down to the business of translating something like "balance" into real paint as it comes off the end of a brush. Unfortunately, however, the words we commonly use in talking about composition are so unclear they could mean almost anything.

"Balance" could require sticking everything together in the middle of a painting, or scattering things about more or less evenly, or perhaps two skinny bananas on one side of a painting, and a big fat monkey on the other side like kids on a teeter-totter. The same could be said of "unity." As for "movement," as far as I know, once you put paint on a canvas, it just stays there very still. Other notions—the relationship of masses, positive and negative space, rhythm, pattern theories—they too are extraordinarily difficult to pin down.

There are plenty of questionable do's and don'ts as well—**don't** cut your picture in half, **do** have three or five things instead of two, **don't** have everything equal, **do** overlap shapes, **don't** have lines leading out of a picture, and lots more. All are familiar rules, yet all have been deliberately ignored by imaginative painters without compromising their designs. The truth is we are delighted when the rules are violated in ingenious ways. We love it when someone does something outrageous, and it turns out to be the most simple and direct solution (in the same way we are thrilled by a perfect crime when no one gets hurt and the insurance company pays).

Some believe mathematical relationships underlie good design. The ancient Greeks loved it; so did the gentlemen of the Italian Renaissance. They chose the placement of focal points, even the proportions of their canvases, according to ratios such as those in Euclid's Golden Mean or other related formats. Another optimistic system called Dynamic Symmetry, based on the geometric distributions on life forms such as plant leaves and sea shells, was also popular for a time, and is even having a revival of sorts today. Commercial artists have a scheme for finding "aesthetic centers" by segmenting their picture with five horizontal and five vertical lines, then choosing a point where any second or third line intersects. Then there is the blindfold approach—drawing random lines, trusting in chaos theory or a guardian angel I guess to produce a result. ***All such systems are a substitute for thinking, and in any case cannot be applied rationally to painting from life.***

In the end, most of us concede our instinct (for lack of a better word) takes over as a final determination. We describe a good composition as simply one that "works," or "feels right," or it does what we want it to. Beyond that, it is hard to be more specific—but read on Dear Friend, this gets even more interesting.

CLEARING UP THE CONFUSION

I don't mean to be overly picky about the teachings or language of composition, and I certainly don't wish to suggest they are not in some way useful. After all something about certain arrangements touches us—so much so that we study them intently to see how they were done. For centuries great paintings have been analyzed for their structures and patterns—we cannot rest with the idea that great artists simply have a **knack** for putting things together. We want to know what the "knack" is, if they have perhaps tapped into some mystical or fundamental law of design, or if they have some insight in which we might share.

There is no question in my mind they had insights, but please believe me, no one yet has found a universal principle, or fundamental law, or natural formula for good composition. And you can bet your grandmother's teeth it won't be discovered next week or in your lifetime.



CHICKEN oil on panel, 8 x 12, 1996

This painting is held together by an abstract design seen on the right. The insert shows the pattern clearly. It did not take any special ability to do this. It was simply a matter of connecting all of the darks together, and then adding a couple of slashes of color drawn from the actual background colors which were there. This type of vignette pattern has been used for centuries in informal sketches, but reached its peak of sophistication when it was widely painted to perfection by the great American Illustrators in the 20th century.



WHAT IT REALLY IS

What we are really seeing when we are attracted to striking designs is simply artists' ingenious solutions to their particular problems of arrangement. We are looking at the result of their thought processes rather than the operation of an elemental law. I believe one of the reasons certain artists are able to do that is because they have a very clear and strong understanding of what they wish to paint and how they want to express it. It is when ideas are fuzzy that self-expression becomes so difficult. (Ask any writer.)

Knowing what we wish to say comes first, the design then follows effortlessly.

The more interesting design solutions tend to endure because the people who thought of them were very innovative. (The same is true of technique.) When those solutions were linked to other cultural basics of their time—tradition, religion, philosophy, economics, or mathematics—they merged to form whole periods or schools of composition such as Classical Greek, Roman, Italian Renaissance, Baroque, Dutch, Victorian, or Tang dynasty. Today these influences still abide, but are not reflected in Modern art. The playing field in the area is now so extensive and aggressively experimental no single trend has emerged as dominant.

What fascinated me most of all in the works of artists whose compositions captured me, was how fresh and imaginative their thinking was. Like children who have yet to be restrained by convention, great designers are constantly open and always wondering. When asked the classic question, "how many things can you do with a brick," children don't just say something about building a wall as adults might. Instead their imaginations come alive.

Mozart is a perfect example of such thinking. He was an unequalled prodigy. Born into the so called Classical period, with its myriad of rigidly acceptable musical practices, he could have cooperated and cashed in on his skills. Instead his imagination and *lets-try-this-and-see-what-happens* ingenuity fed a seemingly endless stream of music from both his pen and his performances. He used the same instruments and performers his contemporaries did, but he demonstrated they were using only a ***fraction*** of the available possibilities and power at their command. What he created not only had never been heard before, but it utterly transformed music for generations. Today his legacy of beauty is embraced by us with awe, though he created it more than two centuries ago.

MY SOLUTIONS

For me, the designs of my paintings are not ends in themselves. I think of them as I do the other essential elements I need to voice my ideas. To give you an analogy, the purpose of my house is to have a comfortable place to live in, one which charms me, rather than something to impress the neighbors. My attitude toward design is similar. All I care about is whether it serves to depict the thing I am painting, and then pleases me when I see it finished. I don't worry about either following or breaking any of the guidelines, or even if my design is particularly clever or sophisticated or original. To me, composing is simply a matter of having a definite picture of what I want to see on my canvas—and then doing it.

My hope is to capture a viewer's attention, then direct it to the important areas of the painting, and keep it there. Any design which facilitates that happening is "good" composition in my view. It is simply whatever does the job—whatever viewpoint or arrangement I think will convey my idea best.

I have a few standards for myself (which I interpret rather liberally). One of them is about **subtlety**. Whenever my design becomes too obvious or overpowering, it interferes with my purpose. I want you to see my picture first, not my design. As with any other element in a painting, I believe composition should remain a functional part of the whole. (Unless the design itself is the point of the subject.) Along with this, I believe **simplicity** is a good idea whenever possible. I would rather not risk confusing my audience with conflicting points of interest or unnecessary ostentation. (A little is nice, though.) I like a certain **naturalness** too. By that I mean showing things the way a normal human being sees the world, rather than viewpoints only a mouse, or a soaring bird, or a fish would experience. I can't expect my viewer to believe I was submerged underwater or suspended in mid-air while painting. Finally, I like to alternate between being super **literal** and being **loosely arty** in my renderings. I don't want to bore anyone either.



THE SONG oil on canvas, 18 x 24, 1993

This is without question the strongest use of pattern I have ever made.

DECISIONS, DECISIONS

In working from life with something already arranged, such as a landscape, all I have to do is make choices. Once I settle on what I wish to paint, it is up to me—and me alone—to pick out which specific section of the landscape to do. It is then my task to select a vantage point I find satisfying, to judge how large or small I wish to represent it, and to decide where I want to place it within my canvas. When I am arranging a subject to paint (setting up a still life or a model, for example) I have more options, and therefore more decisions to make as well. Since I can arrange things in any way I wish, I must have a plan. If I don't have one, I won't know where to start, what to shoot for, or even when I'm finished. Bad choices are things I don't wish to see on my canvas, so I don't choose them.

So, how do I make my choices? The same way I choose from a box of chocolates—according to what appeals to me. I usually know what I want to paint, or at least what I'm looking for, so that part is not a problem. (I never just have an urge to paint.) First an idea comes. Then I clarify my idea. I see it in my mind as a painting by going through my version of that mental checklist I described in Chapter Three on Starting. I ask myself *why* I want to paint the thing I have in mind, and *what* it is about the subject I find intriguing. The *how-to-do-it* then becomes obvious once I understand the *what* and *why*. When I do it in such a way—as opposed to searching through a set of rules and theories—it isn't hard, it's fun! It's like creating my own banana split with all the maraschino cherries and chocolate syrup my little heart desires, and I'm the one who gets to eat it! It is total freedom because I can do anything. You can too!

GOOD THINGS TO KNOW—BUT BE CAREFUL

So, are there no rules? Is there nothing more than your instinct to guide you? Are there no merits in the traditional principles we are taught about composition? Of course there are! The very things I mentioned above—the abstract notions I said were so difficult to pin down—all those ideas are invaluable tools when they are understood in more specific terms. Just bear in mind they are only *suggestions*, not rule-bound *instructions*. They are useful ideas, but they are not in any way absolute requirements. Moreover, most compositions rarely involve all the elements of design. For example, many paintings do not contain large simple masses, strong lines, or even a noticeable pattern, yet they satisfy us. The following are the more familiar compositional basics, with my version of what they are, and are not.

BALANCE is one of the most constant preoccupations when it comes to composition. When painters are unhappy with a composition the first thing they say is: it doesn't work. When asked what *that* means, they say it doesn't *balance*. When pushed to explain further, they point out how everything is too much over here or over there, or grouped at the bottom or top, or just scattered about in a way which leaves them uneasy. The problem almost solves itself when they can finally be *that* specific; just move things where they look better to you.

If I can describe why a picture looks out of balance to me—exactly which thing bothers me—I am at the same time providing myself with the solution to correct it. If I am unhappy with things shoved to one side, I can just move them to the center, or the other side, or wherever I please. That's all there is to it. The Design Police will not come crashing through my studio door and arrest me for violating the rules of balanced composition.

There are no "right" places to put things except where they look best to me. If I don't like the way nature is arranged I can find a better viewpoint. In any case, there is no commandment I must have balance in a painting. The whole idea of balance stems from tradition anyway. There is a belief that a sense of visual balance in art stems from our natural physical need for equilibrium, but there is no real evidence for that. Art is a human invention (along with all the forms and conventions that go with it). Looking at art and responding to it is a learned human phenomenon. If there were anything natural about it, cats would pounce at pictures of mice, but they don't, at least not mine. (Possibly I need to paint mice more convincingly.)



NANCY'S VELVET CAPE oil on canvas, 24 x 40, 1994

Here is another example of pattern as the dominate design structure in a painting. What is particularly interesting about this picture is the design pattern. In its usual form it is a series of connected dark shapes on a light field; in this case it is a pattern of both connected dark shapes and a series of connected light shapes intertwined to create a dance of designed values.

I must confess I did not plan this fortunate outcome. My intention at the start was merely to connect the darks, but as the painting developed, I saw I could do the same, or nearly the same with the light areas.

On a personal note, this is one of the many paintings I have done of Nancy on New Years Day as our way of celebrating. We alternate; one year I paint her, the next year she paints me.



As far as I know, we are not endowed with an inborn sense of what is aesthetically effective about balance or anything else. If such a capacity were included in our DNA or breathed into our souls, Art would be boring stuff indeed. Not only that, it would probably all look the same in every culture and generation. We learn much by being taught, but also a lot through discovery and experimentation. I like breaking the rules when I paint. For me, the idea of **incongruity** (not in keeping with what is appropriate or proper) is seductive because when I use it with a deliberate purpose in mind, the tension can be very effective—it is the same twist which makes a good joke funny. It was also the most fun of being a little boy. I know. So having all the interest shoved up into one corner of a painting can sometimes be not only refreshing, but very powerful indeed, as you shall see.

HARMONY in design is more difficult to pin down. It is not some ideal relationship among the elements in a painting. There is no such thing. There are no valid absolutes underlying design as such, only passing taste. Disharmony is easier to explain. As with color, it is the presence of something that can't possibly belong, except perhaps as a glaring anomaly, which is easy to identify because it invariably involves an error in drawing, values, edges or color. If your subject looks OK (nothing cockeyed or out of kilter) to you, but your painting doesn't, then you probably made technical mistakes. To find your errors, use the process of elimination I described in Chapter One (Free Advice). It works.

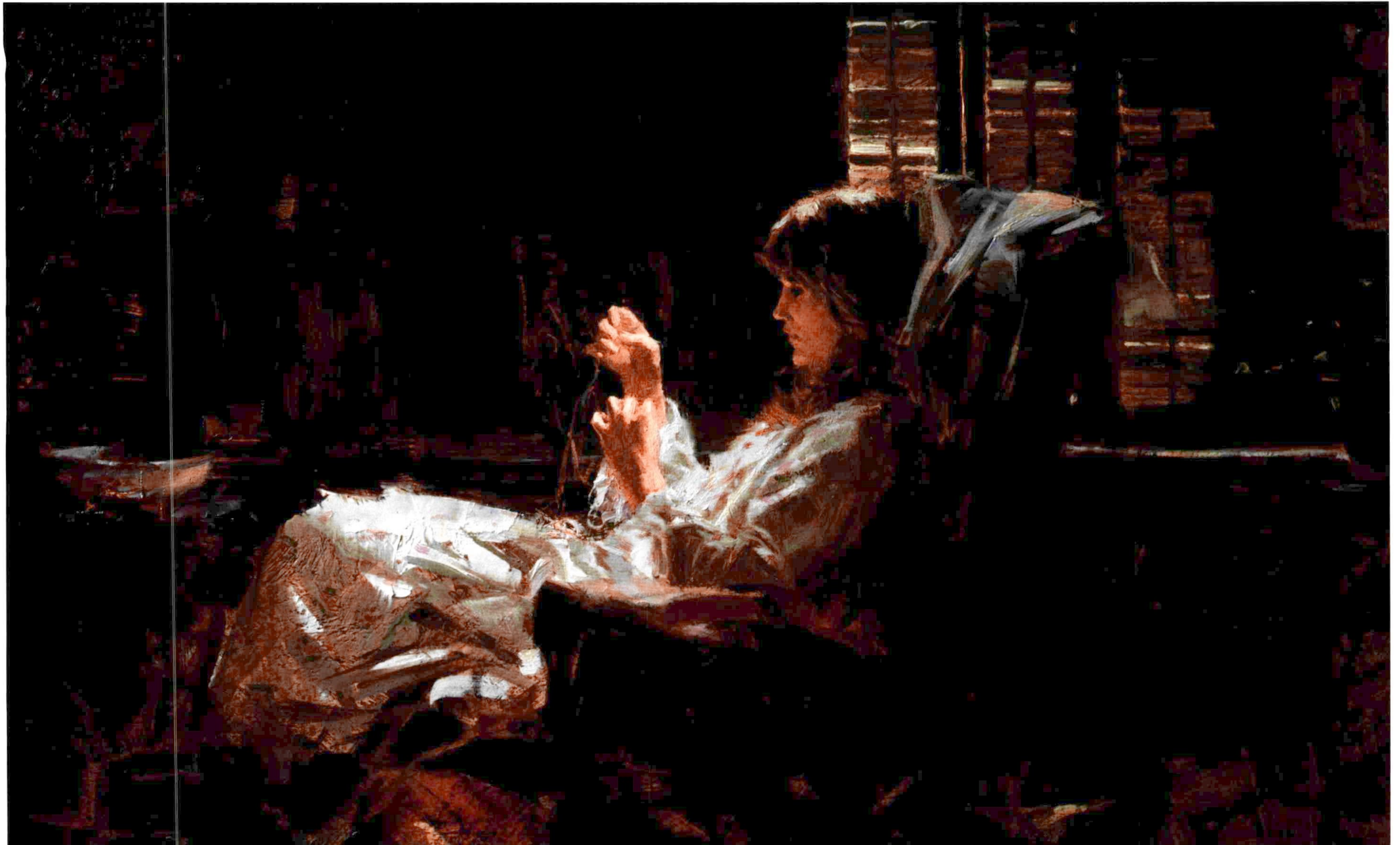
If you have arranged a subject, such as a still life, and it doesn't look harmonious to you, it means you didn't have a clear idea of what you wanted to do. If you did, you would have had no problem putting things exactly where you wanted them, and you would be happy.

LINES OF DIRECTION are the conspicuous edges of long shapes (or actual lines) in a painting which presumably "lead" an observer's attention where you want it to rest. It's helpful when they seem to travel to your center of interest. If they lead out of your picture or in some way seem awkward to you, they can often be softened or even eliminated without being noticeably unfaithful to the subject. If you can't do that, find another spot from which to paint. Some subjects have no strong lines at all, and that's fine. Lines are not the only tools we have.

Be wary of the many curious notions about lines, particularly the belief that certain lines in themselves have suggestive personalities. There are supposed to be happy lines, sad lines, sexy lines (naturally), spiritual lines, lines that shouldn't touch, symbolic lines, and so on. Ideas such as these are simply attempts to create rules of design. Lines are simply lines. If you come across such nonsense, ignore it. Perspective lines, however, are *vital*. Get them right, but eliminate them after they have served their purpose.

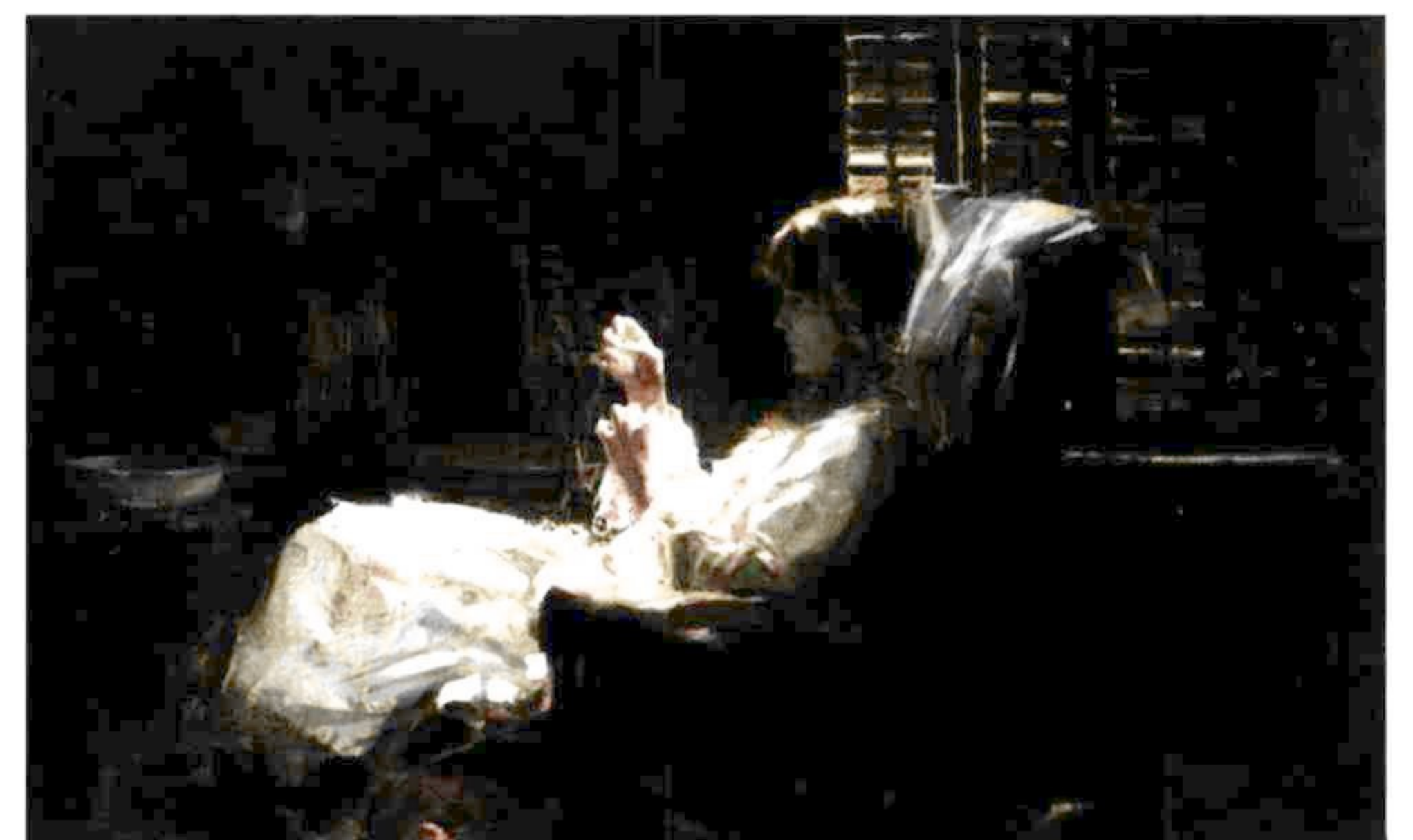
MOVEMENT and **RHYTHM** are also ideas about controlling the attention of an observer's gaze, except that shapes are involved instead of lines. *Movement* can probably best be described as the use of more or less connected shapes to nudge a viewer's interest within a painting—stopping at the main dish, of course (your focal point)—then going around again. *Rhythm* in music is defined as the regular recurrence of a beat. I presume in painting it is something similar, such as a repetition of certain identical or nearly alike shapes intended to make things more pleasant along the way—having all your ducks in a row, so to speak. This is not a bad idea if the shapes are actually present in the subject. If they aren't, and you move the shapes indiscriminately, your painting will not look exactly as the subject does, but it is always your choice.

If the repetitive shapes in your subject are boringly similar, as they usually are in new or modern structures, tap into your imagination and find a way to break up the monotony, or paint something else which has the character marks of age. I have observed that pre-modern architecture just gets better with age, but modern architecture only gets worse. Perhaps that is why modern wonders are torn down so quickly.



GRETCHEN SEWING oil on panel, 10 x 16, 1985

This is an early portrait of my daughter Gretchen—a classic Dutch composition (although horizontal instead of vertical) and an excellent example of the use of pattern to achieve unity in painting. I used transparent dark values in all of the shadows, and opaque paint in all lighted areas. Pattern, especially one as strong and simple as this one, was probably the most commonly used compositional motif for portraiture beginning with the Dutch painters and continuing to this day. Note how nearly all light areas are connected, as are all dark areas. There are very few "floating" values of any consequence to disturb the pattern, or draw the observer's eye away from the focal point. For pure concentration of attention, nothing beats this. It is like a single voice in a quiet room.



Ideas about Movement and Rhythm are perhaps more useful in setting up a model or still life because you have more control in those situations. Elements to be painted can be arranged with a definite plan. Still, plan or no plan, you can never count on a person seeing your painting the way you might like them to—someone buying a painting as an investment might see only your signature. With a nude figure painting, you know where eyes will go no matter what else is in the picture.

VALUES, the fewer the better, especially unbroken, well-defined ones, are considered essential if you really want to get attention. Such was one of the first commandments I read when I was younger. Well, if that is true we would have to write off the major portion of Monet's work. Unquestionably, simple contrasting values yield strong statements, just as a powerful voice gets more attention than a lot of little twitters. I think the key word here though is appropriateness. Subtlety, softness, intricacy, and other qualities have their place in judging art. A whispered word under the right circumstances can be louder than shouting. Strong simple values are wonderful when they are obviously *the* outstanding quality of a subject; however, if those values are not there, don't try to invent them. When you are singing a lullaby, you shouldn't scare the daylights out of a kid by doing it like you were singing Grand Opera. When your values match those in your subject, your painting will have all the authority it needs.

FOCAL POINTS are centers of interest—places you want your viewer to pay attention to—the vital spot where lines of direction and movement are supposed to lead. A center of interest makes good sense. The mind wanders when there is nothing to focus on, which is why politicians and art critics are so boring. Having one dominant focal point certainly seems to be the best way to avoid confusing a viewer. Rembrandt, as we know, was very good at this, and his placement of a single illuminated face against a dark background is a classic standard.

When there are many elements in a composition, as in a tolerable ménage à trois, a choice must be made about which should prevail. *That*, of course, is up to you. If the thing you want to be your center of interest is already outstanding in your subject, just paint what you see. If other elements compete for attention, simply emphasize the one you want, or subdue the others, or do both. It is easy to create a single powerful center of interest—just concentrate the brightest colors, sharpest edges, the most interesting drawing, and most contrasting values all in one spot!

Don't worry about where on a canvas to put your center of interest. There is no "right" place to put a center of interest other than where it looks best to you—where you hope to direct your viewer. The idea that there is an ideal aesthetic center on your canvas is as silly as the right place for a cloud in the sky.

PATTERN is one of the most important design structure essentials to know about. Typically, it is a large conspicuous shape (or more often a grouping of shapes) within a picture area to form an abstract value design. This can be created by connecting either the light or dark values in a subject together *en masse* against a contrasting background. For example, the shape of a model's white dress may connect with the light-colored shapes of a background to form a single larger shape. Often two or three connected value shapes can be beautifully entwined to form a sort of visual fugue on a canvas in the same way multiple melody lines dance together in music. More basic patterns serve nicely as a sort of master plan when a subject already has broad simple values joined, or when you wish to set up a subject in such a way as to have such a pattern to paint.

We are all familiar with these frameworks in the other arts—the spin-off of a fugue into its variations in music, or the interplay of storylines in a novel. Such structures when they join provide a single unifying motif in which to expand even more ideas. The concept and use of Pattern goes so far back in time its origins have been lost. I have found it in ancient Egyptian, Greek, and Chinese art. It continued through the Italian Renaissance and following periods to us today. I always found it amusing that Modern art, which embraces abstraction as its staple, claims it as something revolutionary in art.

GLACIER WATERFALL

oil on panel, 20 x 12

Swan Lake, Alaska, 1998

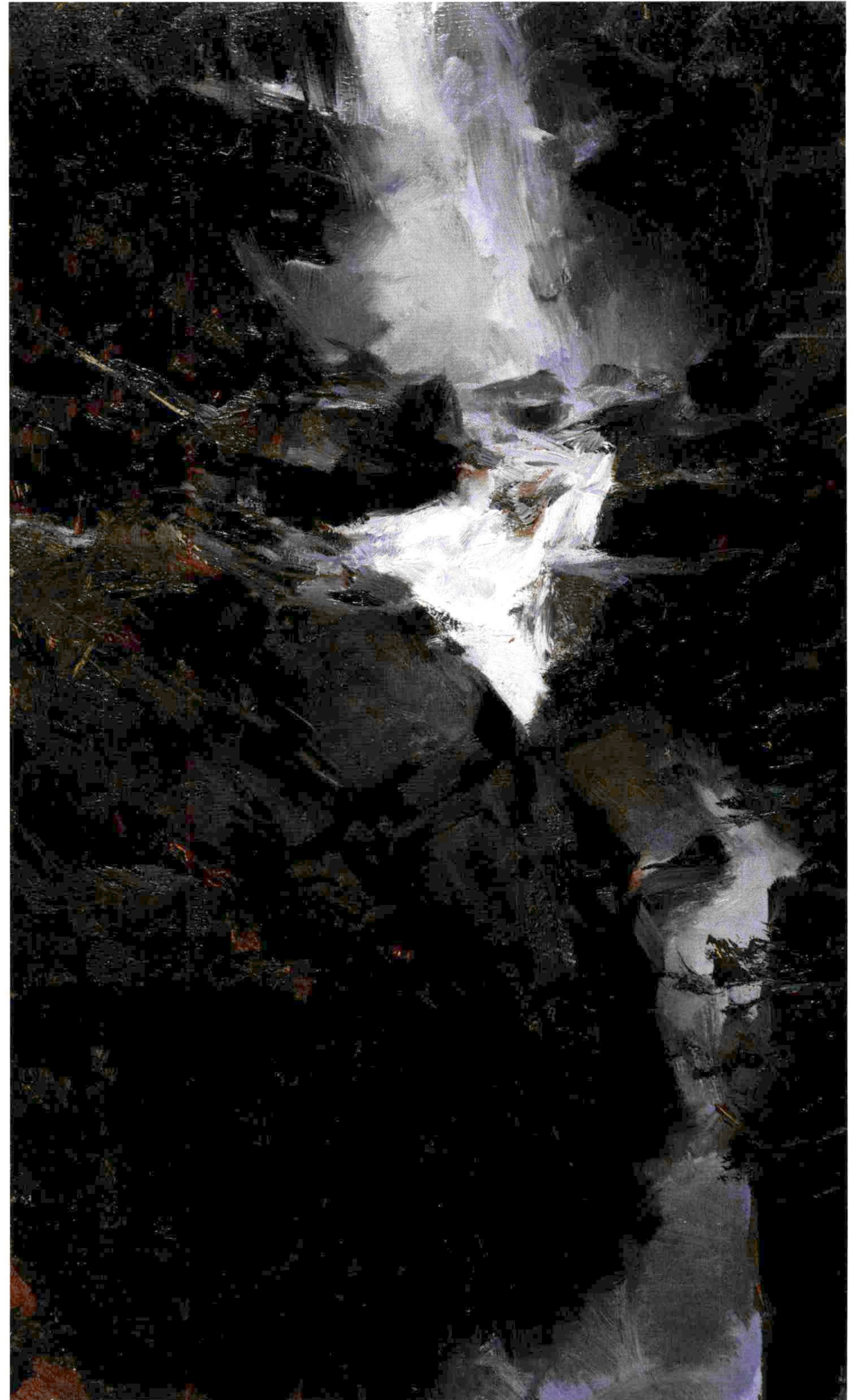
Pattern, the design resource I use here is the most effective method I know of to achieve overall "unity" in a painting. The painting to the right is a very simple pattern—a single light value traversing two dark shapes. Other clear examples of pattern can be seen on pages 7, 10, 15, 26, 31, 34, 44, 47, 49, 55, 56, 58, 61, 65, 75, 77, 82, 105, 115, 121, 129, 131, 132, 145, 149, 151, 158, 160, 167, 171, 173, 175, 195, 199, 201, 209, 227, 229, 231, 233, 245, 257, 259, 261, 263, 265, 268, 269, 275, 283, 291, and 292.

Pattern as a deliberate compositional motif came into broad use with the rise of Chiaroscuro (high contrast light and shadow) in the 17th century. It infected nearly all schools of Western European painting, but its best examples can be seen in Dutch, Flemish, and Spanish art.

Rubens in his painting, "Descent from the Cross" used it splendidly. Velasquez, Rembrandt, Hals, and others embraced it also. Pattern became the abstract structure unifying complicated paintings; it served as the basis for arranging subject matter and disparate pictorial elements into and within a few main value shapes, rather than allowing things to be scattered about haphazardly.

Pattern gives a painter a plan, a grand design to follow. Often, as here, nature provides a ready-made pattern. Other times we must search for vantage points or manipulate our subjects (as in setting up a model or still life) to achieve a pattern.

The most salient feature of a pattern is that, in a painting, either all of the major light shapes are connected, or all the dark shapes. In the case of certain vignettes, it can be both, often splendidly intertwined as a kind of ballet across a canvas. When I see it I think of the beauty of a Bach fugue.



I use pattern in my compositions whenever it is possible. Patterns are easy to spot both in nature and in art. In the Colorado mountains where I lived for several years, nature's patterns abounded in the massive rock structures, streams, and sweeping cloud formations. In a painting, however, a pattern is simply a flat (two-dimensional) value shape which can be any combination of any visible elements. Objects, patches of sunlight, background values, all can combine (when they are connected) to form a single value pattern. Painters such as Rembrandt, Toulouse-Lautrec, Philip Andreevich Maliavin, and many of the American illustrators used strong patterns as the basis of their compositions. In my opinion the all-time Master of *pattern* as the basis of composition was the painter and muralist Sir Frank Brangwyn.

SO WHAT SHOULD YOU DO?

How do you make judgments about your own designs? My advice is first to learn all you can about what has already been done. If you are new to the idea of pattern, go into the Internet and look up Brangwyn and the others I mentioned. Check out the images which show pattern in this book. There are many books available on design theory with helpful graphics and in more detail than I can provide here. Some books are worthwhile, but others, because they are rigidly dogmatic (filled with rules), or written in vague terms, should not be taken seriously. Make sure the ideas and explanations in them are written in plain everyday English instead of arty gobbledygook such as: "Unity is harmony in balance with objective rhythmic dynamics." That kind of drivel is simply ostentation concealing ignorance, and it leads nowhere.

Be sensible. Don't take anything seriously which is not specific and clearly stated. If it is specific, don't accept it unless it is well-grounded and you understand and agree with it. If you are a student, ask your teacher to explain things in down-to-earth terms. If that doesn't work, offer your brush and ask for a demonstration. In the event a teacher is unable or unwilling to do either, then find yourself another teacher. When you do connect with a wise teacher, use the words *why* and *how* a lot. Good teachers like that, and you get good answers.

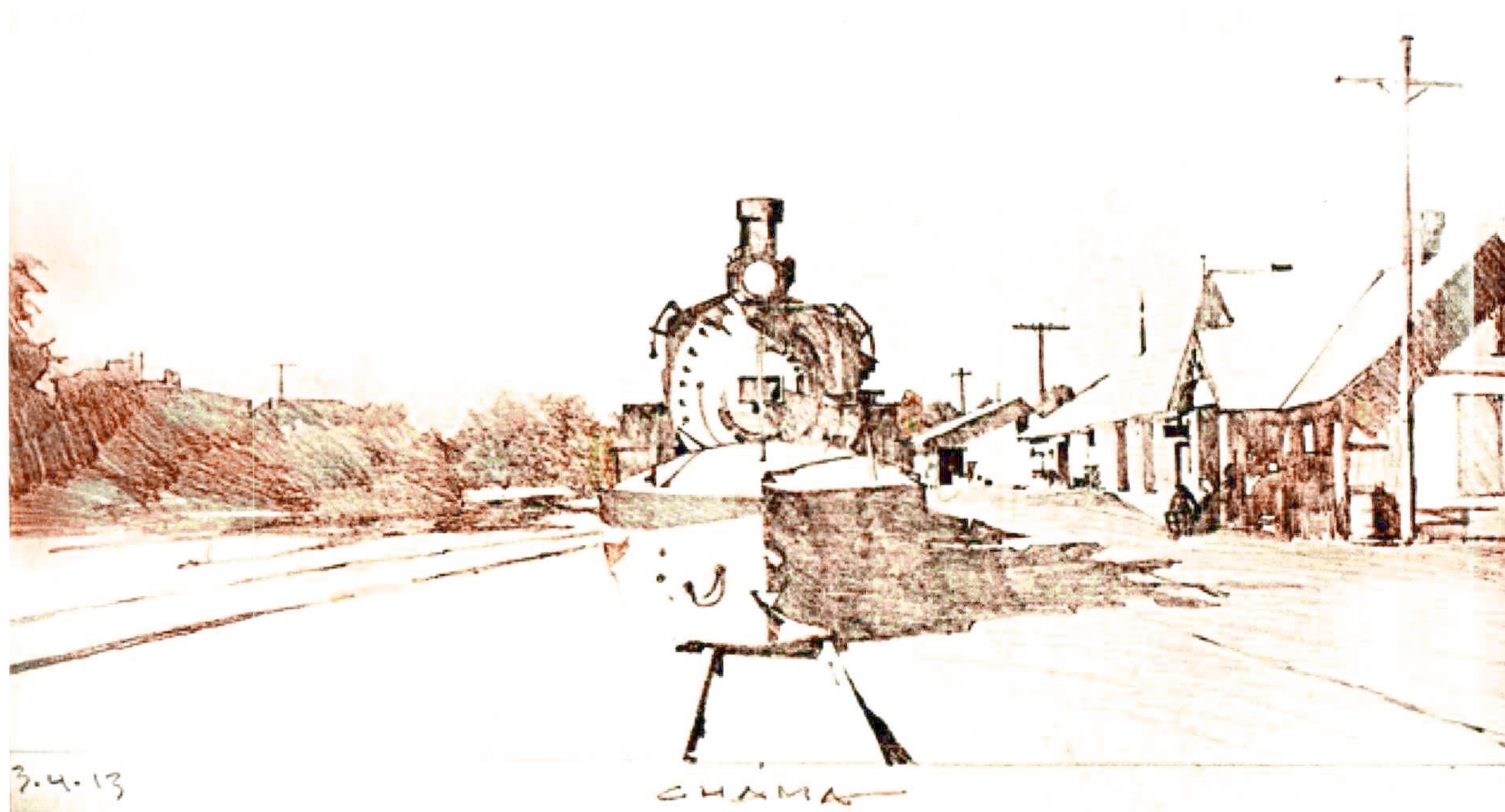
Above all, always be on the lookout for paintings with designs you find thrilling. Try to figure out *why* you like them. If you know *what it is* about a design that turns you on—exactly *what* the artist captured which you would like to capture too—then you will have learned something valuable about yourself, and that *something* can become part of *your* repertoire too! It is relatively easy to see how a design is produced once you become aware of exactly what the artist sought to achieve.

You have heard this before, but it is true. Look to the compositions in Nature! She is an infinite source of design. Like a perfect lover, she never disappoints, never grows ugly, and never fails to reveal herself in fascinating new ways. Just be faithful to her.

DRAWINGS by CHARLES HUNTER (opposite)

I do not know if I ever said no one is born with a natural sense of design, but if it is within the realm of human evolution, or the whim of the Divine, to allow one individual to possess such a gift, then Charles Hunter is certainly the lucky winner. Since he began painting and drawing as a new member of the Putney Painters some time ago, Charlie has dazzled, nay, shocked, and always transported us by his uncanny ability to seize upon the most unnoticeable of things, and transform them into bewitching jewels.

No Oriental or Occidental Master of the pure line can surpass what Charlie, almost matter-of-factly does when he takes pencil in hand. I include a few samples on the right as design qualities for inspiration.



DRAWINGS by CHARLES HUNTER



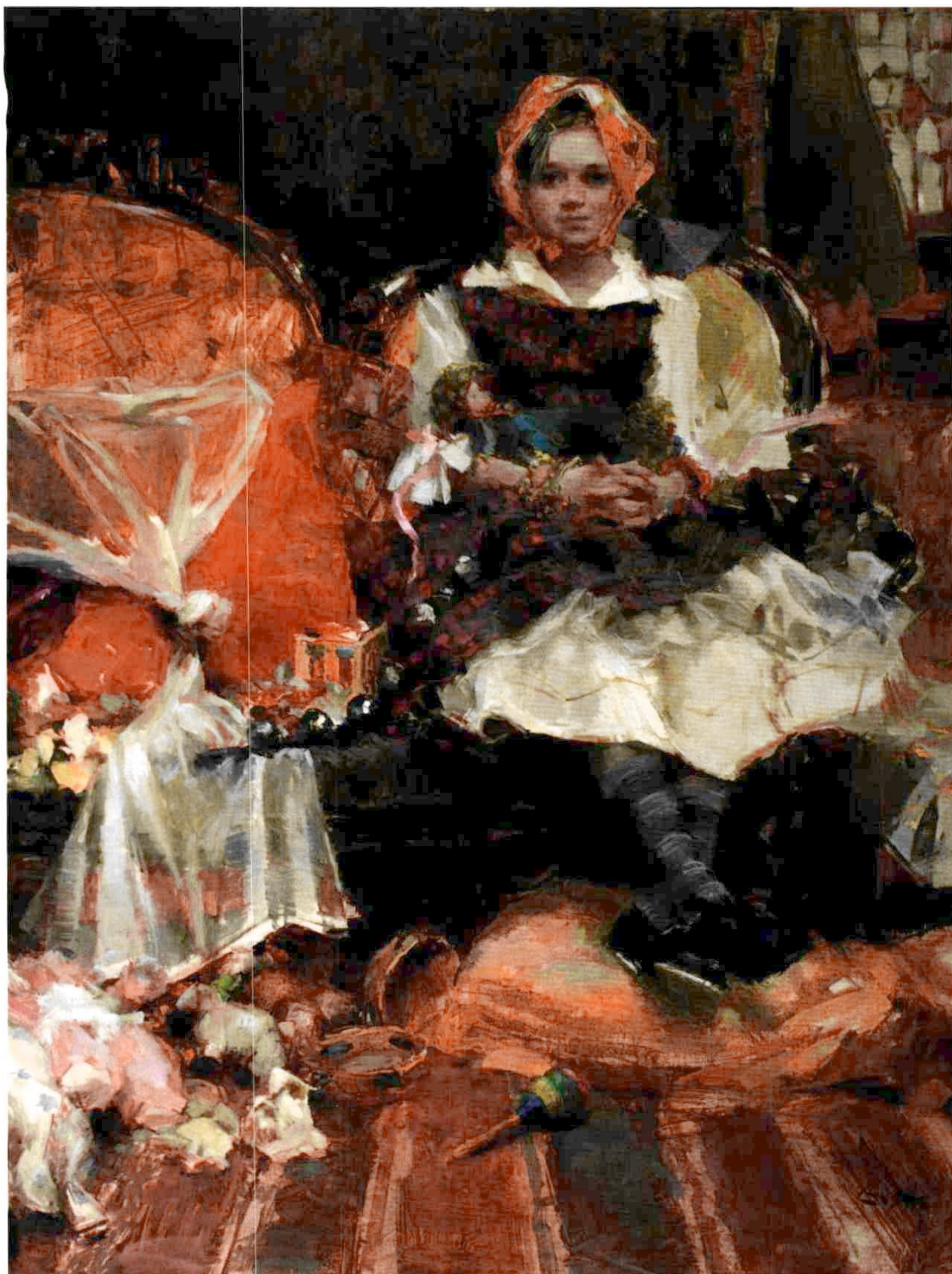


NANCY GUZIK *THE PAINTER* oil on canvas, 36 x 20



NANCY GUZIK *BIANCA* oil on canvas, 40 x 24

I use the images on this page and those on the right as examples of remarkable compositions. Being associated with, and eventually married to Nancy Guzik, I had a singular opportunity to witness the development of her design abilities. While she worked to perfect her skills in other areas of painting, somehow her sense of creating compelling arrangements evolved naturally.



NANCY GUZIK. *TANGERINE SCARF* oil, 16 x 12

Nancy says sometimes a perfect composition often awaits her in a subject, but in other situations, she must compose the elements that make up a subject.

When working with children she relies entirely on their own instinctive ways of arranging themselves. She then picks what she feels is the best vantage point for painting.

It is obvious from these five works how successful her reliance on the natural flow of things is. In my mind Nancy's gift lies in spotting the exact moment to capture. I also believe that ability stems from her wonderfully open imagination.

This should get me a pretty good dinner tonight.



NANCY GUZIK. *ZACHARIAH* oil, 8 x 12



NANCY GUZIK. *THE BOOK* charcoal on gesso board, 16 x 20

CHAPTER ELEVEN—TECHNIQUE—PAINTING FROM LIFE

SUCCESSFUL TECHNIQUES ARE THE END RESULT OF CLEAR VISIONS OF THE WORKS TO BE CREATED.

Technique, as distinct from *Techniques*, is about how you physically put paint on your picture. *Techniques* can be anything from well-established and easily recognized methods and media of major periods of art, to just distinctive ways of working, and there are many. Examples are: Broken Color, Glazing, Egg tempera, Gouache, Palette knife, and the like. The word technique is often linked with the word *STYLE*, which is a more general term. Ideally, your technique ought to be a natural extension of your personal style, just as your signature is, or your smile. It's hard to fake a style for very long, because style arises from who you are naturally.

As beginning painters, most of us probably felt we had an awkward technique, or none at all. That, of course, is perfectly natural. It would be strange indeed if anyone could pick up a brush for the first time and flawlessly paint in the style of Rembrandt. As children, we all needed time and practice before we could even walk or talk smoothly. Likewise we must go through a similar effort before fluent painting in our own fashion becomes possible. **Boring and superficial paintings are sure to happen if we adopt techniques as ours which do not arise naturally from within our own individuality.**

There was a time when it was considered shrewd and sensible to be recognized for having a distinctive technique. Certainly that was the case, and still is, in the world of commercial art. (It was and is true as well in fine art circles.) If you were an illustrator, an advertiser or client either chose or rejected you based on your technique and whether you had "delivered" for other clients. When it comes to the contemporary (Modern) art scene, it is more or less the same. An artist's work is far easier to sell if it conforms to a trendy style or the current "ism." In most areas of art, ease of marketing and the artificially created demand for art rest upon recognizable technique (worthy or trite). Why? Because that is where much of the money is. I think it is all nonsense.

In my case, developing a technique or style was never an issue (nor is it now). Under Bill Mosby, I had to paint exclusively from life, which meant dealing with basic tasks like drawing, values, and color. The pressure of those demands did not allow time for me to waste inventing a personal style, but Mosby's emphasis was always on painting loosely (about like Sargent). For more on "looseness" please refer back to page 18 in the chapter on Starting. I was always guided by those memorable words of Popeye the Sailor: "*I yam what I yam, and that's all what I yam.*" Like Popeye, whatever did emerge about technique did so by itself because that's who *I* was. My goal, then as now, was to draw well, to have color which looked true, to get my values and edges right, to create stimulating compositions, and paint subjects I liked. It never occurred to me if anyone would ever care about the way I put paint on my canvas. I loved to experiment with different ways to use paint and I still do so constantly. When experiments work, they go into my bag of methods. Over the years my bag of tools has become very large. I guess I could call it my technique.

I do not mean you or I should not study and learn from the great Masters. On the contrary. The more we know about ingenious ways to apply paint, the more power we will have in doing it in our own paintings. It makes good sense to acquire the methods of artists we admire—the more the better—but they should always remain ancillary to our own personal fancies.

It is important for us to remember the celebrated techniques—all of them—are simply various artists' solutions to the question of how best to use paint in order to portray their subjects. The more effective ways endure and become classics. The Flemish and Dutch schools, Impressionism, the Direct painting of many 19th century painters, and many works of the great Illustrators of the 20th century, are all brilliant achievements. They have influenced me deeply. I understand those methods, and I regard them as high standards. In no way, however, do I feel they are the *ultimate* way of painting, if such there can ever be.



THE GARDEN (Detail), watercolor, 7 x 8, 1991

If I have a strong enough mental picture of what I wish to see on my canvas, that image will include the technique required to paint it. As I mentioned in the chapter on Starting, the image I need to get going does not have to be a complete stroke-by-stroke plan or finished version of what I expect to do. All I really need is a visualization specific enough to guide me through a good sound block-in and finishing stages.

Such images can come from anywhere. While I draw mostly upon myself for ideas, I am also fascinated by subjects or color effects which remind me of another artist's work. Sometimes a model's visage will evoke portraits by Serov, or Mancini (or my own). When I do get ideas from the work of others, my ego is such that my intention is not to imitate, but to capture similar qualities or effects, and then work those ingredients into my own recipe. I often paint pictures similar to the Masters' in order to capture what I feel they missed seeing. (How's that for confidence?) Powerful impressions such as these help me form my own plans for pictures.

Anything can set off my imagination. Once, I copied the colors of the tarnish on my bathtub's brass drainpipe because I thought the color combinations would make a nice harmony in a future painting. Very often the nature of a subject, the size of my canvas, my mood, or the circumstances under which I must paint can dictate the technique I need. For example, a scene containing broad simple shapes will not suggest a picky broken color approach, but something with interesting small patterns will. If I'm out in the wind and rain and I'm hungry, I'm not going to sit around catching pneumonia trying to paint like Vermeer. If I'm in a silly mood, anything can happen.

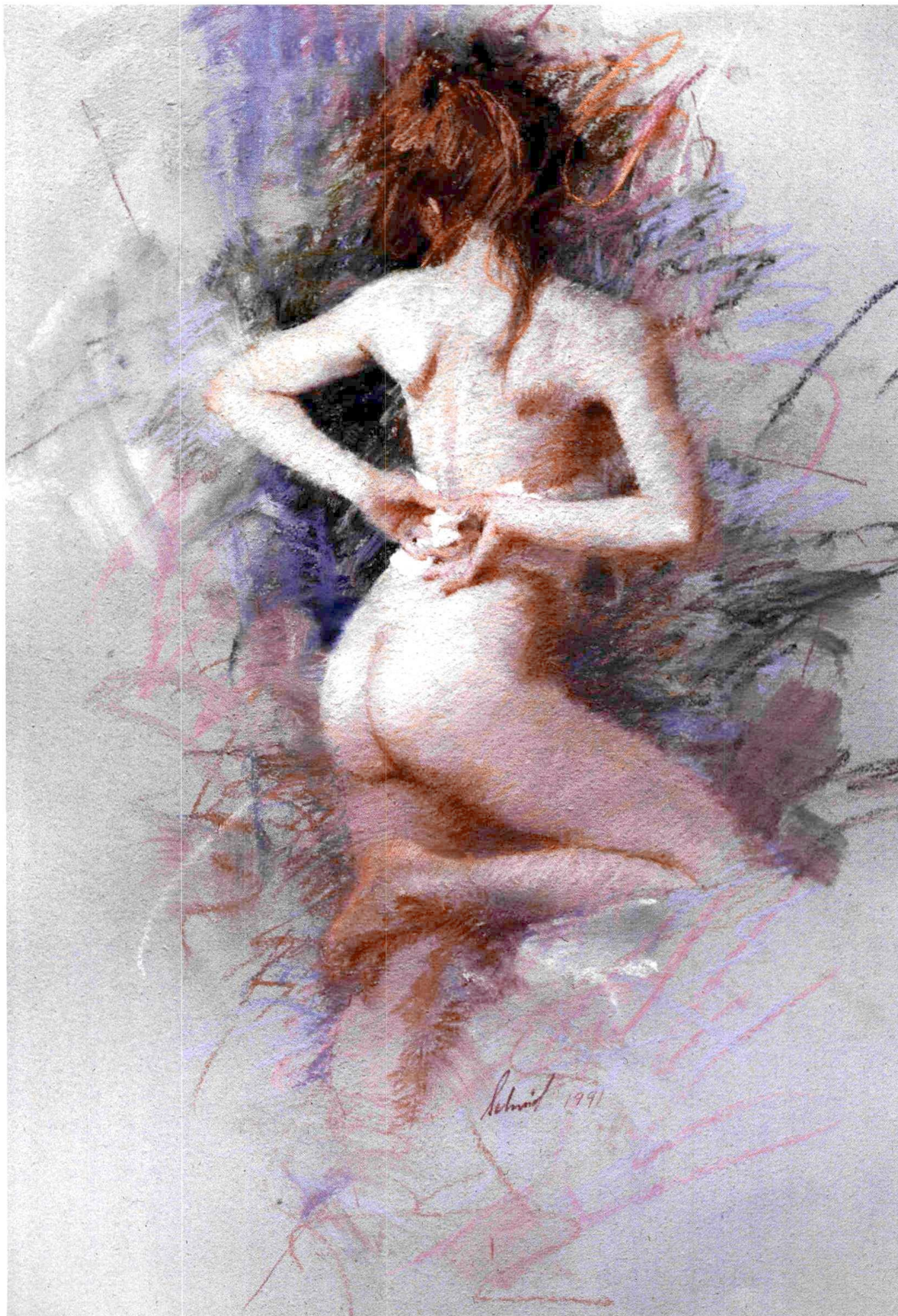
DEVELOPING YOUR OWN TECHNIQUE

You were not born with an innate gift for style; you were just a cute little *tabula rasa* like the rest of us. You acquired personalized skills as you did everything else—through cultural pressures, practice, experimentation, and experience. Even Mozart had to learn to read and write musical notation before he could compose seriously. Learned skill and craftsmanship are as vital a part of technique as having a good idea of what you want to paint and how you wish to paint it. At one time, the words artist and craftsman actually meant the same thing—an artist was first and foremost a skilled person, particularly a person who could draw expertly.

On the whole, I agree with this view. (Assuming, of course, an artistic sensitivity is also present.) Clearly, someone who understands tools will be more successful with them than one who does not. Skill and creativity operate as a feedback system, each stimulating the other to higher levels. The more you already know, the better you will understand new things, and then you can do more, and thus know even more, and so on.

As your experience builds, your knowledge and skills will develop. Along with this your confidence will also strengthen. This is the time to switch on your imagination and call upon the many ideas that carried you into art in the first place. The clarity of your envisioning—how sure you are about what you want to see on your canvas—will tell you how to put the paint on it, because it will seem obvious and feel normal. That is what a personal technique is. It arises naturally as you paint, just as your handwriting did, and it will surely include techniques you have adopted from others whose works you admire. Don't worry about being overly influenced though. All great painters learned from other painters. Whatever you do absorb from the Masters, or your teachers (or me in this book), will be tempered in time as you mature and your personality puts its own special spin on things.





PASTEL STUDY pastel on paper, 24 x 17, 1991



NUDE oil on canvas, 21 x 10, 1987

GOOD HABITS

A very wise lady, the daughter of a Supreme Court Chief Justice, once remarked to me that for better or worse, there was "*nothing quite like watching a professional in action.*" She knew, having grown up in the world she did, that a professional has a pragmatic mentality. Real pros, whether stone masons or lawyers, do their homework. The methods they use are the best available. They leave as little as possible to chance, and above all, they know what they are doing because they pay attention to experience, and they practice a lot.

Here are some of the things I have learned about good working habits and a professional attitude—the hands-on specifics of technique:

1. Don't be afraid of your paints and tools. Be in charge. Whether you work with oils, watercolor, pastels, charcoal, acrylic, conté, or all of these—study them! Experiment endlessly, see what they can do and what they can't. Master them rather than the reverse. Try everything you can think of to exhaust their possibilities and overcome their difficulties, if any. Remember and use the things that produce results.

2. Use the best available tools—especially when it comes to your brushes. Sell your grandmother if necessary, but buy the best you can find. As a matter of policy I do not endorse products, however, in my personal opinion the *Rosemary* brushes are in a class by themselves. I know Rosemary, and I know she regards her brushes as her art. I agree and have been using them exclusively for several years now. Unlike many of the machine-made brushes sold today, Rosemary's brushes are handmade by skilled artisans in Yorkshire, England. They are competitively priced, durable, and above all, dependable. They always seem to know exactly what I want them to do. For information or a catalogue go to www.rosemaryandco.com.

Most brush manufacturers like to put something like starch or other water soluble stiffener on the bristles, so they will look well pointed or chiseled while they are on display at an art store. Don't trust they will stay that way after you use them once. Usually you can't tell good ones from cheap ones just by looking at them. Good brushes hold their shape when they are wetted in water (bring your own can of water to the art store to test them if necessary). Don't spend the grandmother money without soaking the ones you wish to buy to see what happens.

Bristle brushes should stay flat and well formed wet or dry. (A flat oil bristle brush should have an edge like a carpenter's chisel.) Sable, synthetic, and other soft hair brushes should retain a good shape naturally wet or dry if they are well made to begin with. Never buy brushes that have their edges trimmed for uniform length of the hairs. They are the cheapest of the cheap, and a waste of money. However, you can use them to baste a turkey, or clean between your computer keys.

3. Take care of your brushes. Wash them lovingly in mild hand soap. Never use cleansing powders or anything with bleach in it; bleach will dissolve natural brush hairs. Work them over and over until you have a clean white lather (it usually takes me three soapings and rinsings), then rinse them well and shape them for drying. Sable brushes can be shaped with the fingers if necessary. I like to shape a flat bristle brush by folding a small piece of cardboard over the bristles and securing it with a clip (like putting curlers in hair only the "curler" is flat). This sounds like a lot of bother, but it's worth it.

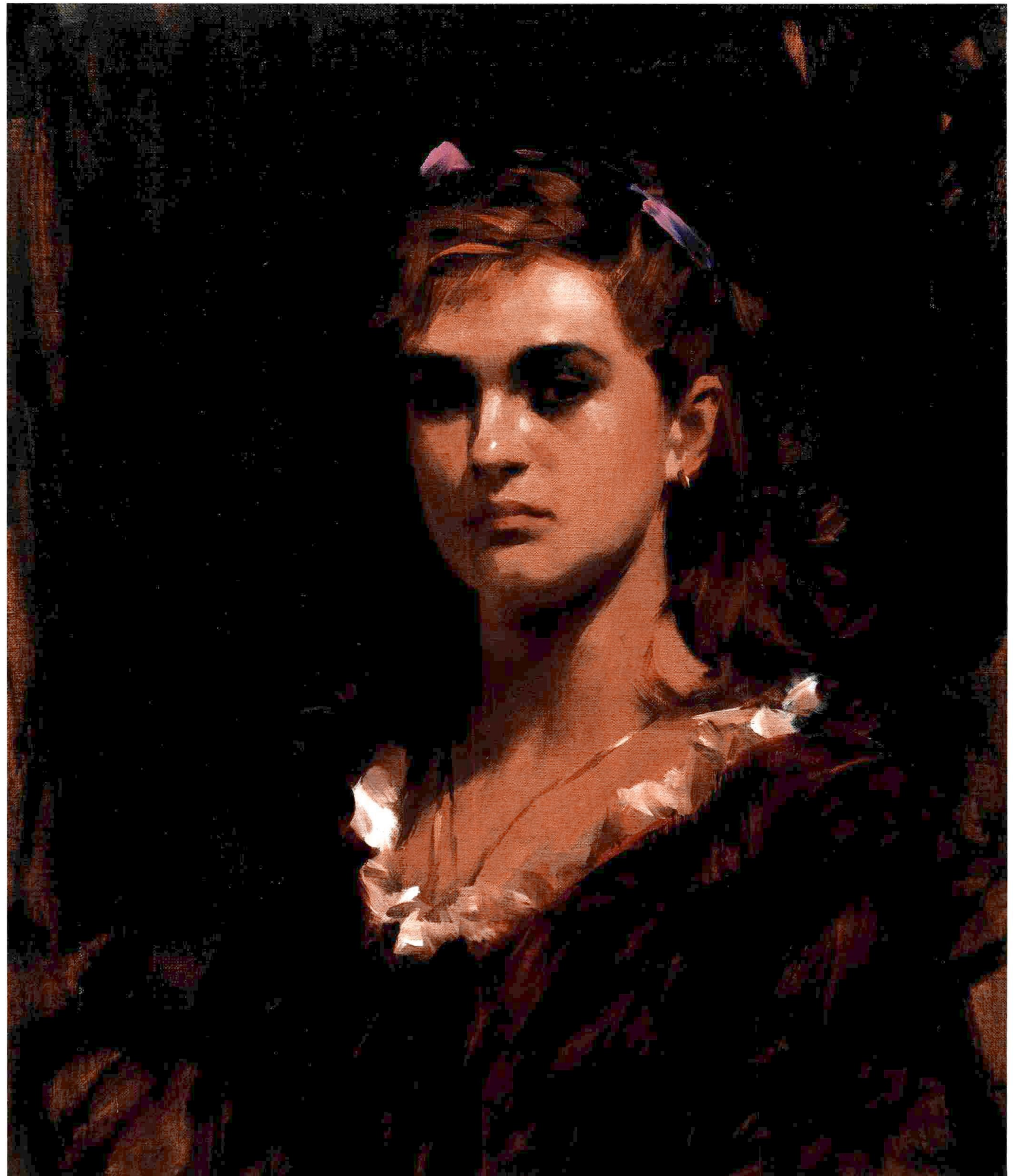
My brushes are my little friends—my slaves actually. They must be in a condition to perform for me. If the bristles or hairs are choked with dried paint where they go into their ferrules, they will lack the "spring" I need, and if they are not evenly shaped at the point, I consider them useless. Working with bad brushes is like playing the piano while wearing boxing gloves.

During our recent visit to John Singer Sargent's London studio, Nancy and I were quite moved to be in the room where so much beauty was created. Seeing her by the same window, in the same light as Sargent painted under, I realized I was looking at the same problem he faced each time he set out to do a portrait.

It sounds presumptuous, but I remember thinking as I was painting Croatian Girl (right), that it might have been the way Sargent painted. However, he died nine years before I was born, so I can only make an educated guess about his methods. Also the few words he left us are merely tantalizing hints about what went on in his mind as he worked.

Nevertheless, I feel I have reached a stage in my work where I can correctly assume methods of his which I feel are probably true.

*I know without any doubt he was very careful, and most likely did **not** paint as rapidly as Sorolla. (Some of his surface brushwork only **looks** like he did it fast.) I also know he placed his canvas (when he could) as close to his subject as possible in order to constantly compare his painting to his model. He liked to view his painting and model side by side from a distance of probably 8 to 12 feet.*



CROATIAN GIRL oil on canvas, 21 x 18, 1987

4. Be generous with your paint. Don't skimp on it. Put enough on your palette for impasto painting and always have your colors arranged in the same order on your palette. Get into the habit of rinsing your brush in mineral spirits (called white spirits in the UK and other countries), and removing the spirits before dipping into clean piles of pigment so you avoid contaminating your pigments. Use a palette knife to mix large portions of paint. If you work in pastels, use the best, and have a large assortment. Return each to its properly ordered place as you work so you won't have to search when you need the same one again.

5. Keep your palette orderly, and *clean it often* as you work. I use a razor scraper and denatured alcohol to clean my palette about every twenty minutes or so as I work. Glass palettes clean the easiest and never stain, especially if paint has dried on it. Use lacquer thinner and the razor scraper on dried paint (and have your working area well ventilated). Make sure your palette is large enough for generous mixing too. Don't try to save leftover paint mixtures either. Rarely are they exactly what you need later anyway.

6. A clean brush is essential for painting with clean color. To rinse my brushes, I have two large containers (coffee cans) of mineral spirits (or water when I work in gouache and watercolor). I dip my brush into one container, swish it around a lot, then do the same in a second can of cleaner mineral spirits. Then I wipe my brush as thoroughly dry as I can before dipping into a new color. That is how I get clean color in my paintings. It's as easy as that. Later I pour off the dirty mineral spirits into other containers. The paint in the discarded mineral spirits will settle to the bottoms of their containers in only a few days, leaving clear mineral spirits to be used again. I also have plenty of highly absorbent paper towels handy. I buy the most expensive, because they do a better job, and I need fewer of them.

7. Have a good solid easel, one that is sturdy, large enough, and adjusts easily. In the studio this is usually not a problem. I built my own studio easel many years ago at a time when there were few on the market of any practical value. For outdoor painting, the French-style easels are convenient if you don't work too large, but they tend to blow over easily, and their palettes are small. I painted larger canvases outdoors from life when I was younger, so I needed something I could depend upon to stay put. Fortunately, I found a sturdy army surplus range finder tripod (for three dollars). I made a few metal adaptors to hold a canvas of any size, and it has served me well ever since. Wind is the one big headache in landscape painting. Rain can be managed with a generous umbrella, but not when there is a gale blowing. My tripod easel has never been victim to the wind, even with an umbrella attached to it.

8. Cultivate as many working methods as you can so you may respond to the demands of painting different subjects. Don't expect that an effective way of painting a landscape will work as well for a child's portrait. Learn to paint thickly, thinly, loosely, tightly, quickly, slowly, and so on, according to the requirements and character of your subjects. Strive to expand your repertoire. For no other reason, I work in different ways just for the satisfaction of confounding art critics who, as we know, are never happy unless they can pigeonhole a painter. (I have been variously designated a neo-realist, the last romantic, classicist, and so on.)

Do not consider your painting finished unless it is what *you* want to see. If you feel you are not skilled enough to see what you would like to see in your paintings, take the time and trouble to find out what it is you need to know, and where you can get the information or instruction to do it. Today there are many more highly accomplished painters giving workshops than there were even a decade ago. There are ways to seek out what you are looking for. The Internet is a marvelous source. Most of the artists I know have websites that give good views of their work, exhibitions, teaching activities, and contact information. Art magazines are also good sources for the same information.

9. For a more complete discussion and analysis of all of my materials, tools, and techniques, see Katie Swatland's book, *Alla Prima II: COMPANION, Richard Schmid's Materials, Tools and Techniques*, listed in Recommended Reading at the end of this book.



RABBITS transparent oil on white lead panel, 8 x 12, 1992

This picture demonstrates the remarkable versatility of oil paint. When I brought this image up from my photographic database, I thought at first it was a conté drawing of mine. I can be forgiven my mistake because I did this 21 years ago, but still, using wet oil paint to successfully imitate a dry medium such as conté shows how easily the look of almost all other mediums and their techniques are within the range of oil paint.

THE PALETTE KNIFE

A palette knife is an amazingly versatile instrument. In the right hands it can produce effects impossible to achieve with a brush alone. Have two or three of them from one inch to three inches long. Expensive Italian knives are the best. They should be elongated triangles, very flexible, with rounded, not sharply pointed tips. Take care they do not get bent downward with use. They must be flat for control—and don't ever let paint dry on them!

A palette knife is customarily thought of as a miniature trowel for applying thick smooth-looking paint, also as a tool to mix pigment or scrape it from a canvas. It does all of that, of course, but far more. Perhaps its best function is in creating edges. When the clean flat surface of the knife is drawn across brush work, it produces a unique form of blending—one you cannot duplicate in any other way. Doing it right takes practice because it must be done in a single stroke.

Unusual edge effects also happen when the knife is used to carefully scrape away wet paint. I use short scraping motions for this with the knife held very lightly and wiped carefully between strokes. The sharp edge of the blade can be used to modify brushstrokes, or other knife strokes, or to apply razor-thin lines of paint. One caution—when you are applying paint with a knife, usually only one edge of your stroke will be satisfactory (unless you are lucky). That edge will most likely be the point where your blade touches the canvas first. Typically, the remaining edges will have to be modified with subsequent strokes with either a brush or knife.

There is no limit to what can be done with a knife. The best way I know of to learn how to use it is to lock away your brushes for several weeks and paint only with knives. I warn you it will be extremely frustrating at first, but don't give up. The difficulty is normal. If you haven't used a knife before, you will feel like you are crippled—like a right-hander doing everything with the left hand or vice versa. However, it is worth every ounce of pain and effort. The ability to use a knife well is like having a whole new language.

The palette knife is not for everyone. It is such a different way of manipulating paint than brushing, something all of us have been familiar with since childhood. So much about it is just lots of patience and experimentation. It is also best learned by seeing it done, which is why I have been preparing a video on the subject to be made available after this book is completed.

And please do not underestimate the points of craftsmanship I described above. You may wonder what having a good easel, washing brushes, or having your pigments in a nice order on a glass palette has to do with actually knowing how to paint well.

The answer, dear friend, is as the saying goes: *The Secret is in the Details*. Great battles and great loves have been won or lost because of attention or inattention to details. Never dismiss them as not having anything to do with success, because they do; just make sure the big picture is always in view.

We know that eloquent painting requires your mind to be filled with knowledge, but it is also a state of mind centered on excellence. When you paint, everything counts, from your inner attitude to the ordinary paper towel you clean your brushes with.





CASCADE BARN oil on panel, 8 x 12, Washington State, 1996

*This little sketch was done entirely with a palette knife. I had traveled to this site, in the Cascade Range east of Seattle with Nancy, and forgotten to bring mineral spirits. With no way to clean my brushes, I resorted to using a knife, which could be cleaned with a swipe of a rag. Normally, I use a palette knife to merely **supplement** my brush painting or achieve special effects. Doing the whole thing with a knife was challenging, and the end result very surprising because, with only a knife to work with, I had to find new ways to manipulate my paint. Knife painting is definitely a learning experience, and well worth the effort. I am grateful to have learned this skill while doing my color charts.*



SKAGWAY TRAWLER oil on canvas, 24 x 36, Alaska, 1993

Skagway Trawler was done with the aid of a close-up photo I shot while cruising about this fog-bound Alaska bay in a leaky rubber dinghy. I also had done an earlier color sketch from a dock at a slightly greater distance. My color study from life was invaluable in compensating for the inherent deficiencies in the photo—particularly in the subtle gradations of color temperature in the misty atmosphere surrounding the boat, and the grays in the water. With situations as sensitive as this, I find it essential to have already painted an identical scene from life. Also, I had painted so many fishing boats from life to use as color references, that the shortcomings in this photo did not matter.

CHAPTER TWELVE—WORKING FROM PHOTOS

CRUTCHES OR MODERN PROGRESS?

Technical advancements in photography since I first wrote this chapter fifteen years ago have been breathtaking. The use of Film in cameras is almost, but not quite, extinct. Digital photography of all kinds is here to stay. From complex high tech instruments, to compact point-and-shoot cell phones instantly transmitting worldwide via satellite, all are now deeply embedded within most levels of human culture. (And who knows what marvels await us around the corner?) Pixels, not paint, are now so pervasive in the graphic arts that commercial art and much of what passes for Fine Art today could not exist without it. Painters at all levels of skill seem irresistibly drawn to the lure of electronic photography.

If you feel a teensy-weensy twinge of guilt about using it in your art, you are not alone. There is something about working from photos that raises the hackles of the "pure" artist within many (but not all) of us. Even those painters who freely acknowledge their dependence on photography do so with either an undertone of apology or a carefully framed rationalization.

Some painters categorically reject the use of photos. Others use them according to their needs, but are to varying degrees uncomfortable about using them. Nevertheless, in my experience over years of giving workshops, I have yet to work with those ambivalent toward photos who are inclined to minimize their use and paint from life. Still others regard the whole issue of using photos as primary subject matter to be a non-issue. They view photography as an obviously sensible and rational modern means to an end. And that is fine. We are all free to make the choices we feel work the best for us. Besides, controversy about photos is hardly new. Since the earliest days of photography, a heated debate has centered on the issue of whether or not photography *itself* could be considered art. That squabble remains to this day, and will surely continue long into the future, along with the questions and views we are considering in this chapter.

The fact is almost everyone uses photos. Even those who deny it have perhaps privately given it a whirl. Its history is ancient. The first recorded mention of an optic phenomenon producing images from light goes back to China in the fifth century B.C. Identical effects (diffraction) were noticed and recorded by Aristotle as he observed a solar eclipse in 330 B.C. Arab astronomers came upon it as well in the tenth century A.D.

Renaissance Italians used the diffraction principle to create the *camera obscura*, which at first was simply a darkened room with a small pinhole in one wall. An inverted image from the pinhole was projected onto the opposite wall. That was soon downsized to a darkened box, with a pinhole on one side, and a flat surface opposite to receive an inverted image from the pinhole. Renaissance painters and scientists used such cameras to copy scenes and refine their ideas on perspective. By the time of the Dutch painters, the little black boxes were no longer novelties. There now seems little doubt Vermeer used some form of a *refraction* camera in creating his works. Eventually, improvements in optics, mechanics, and chemistry gave us improved refraction lenses and film in cameras of the 19th and 20th centuries. The 19th century Naturalist painters depended heavily on photos. Superstars such as Sargent, Sorolla, Zorn and others made free use of the camera, though their use of it was limited.

It should be remembered photos in the early days were rudimentary monochrome images at first, and remained crude at best when artists first started using them. Interestingly, most of those who used them were already well grounded in drawing and painting (and clearly did not require any help from photography). I can only speculate that artists' natural curiosity was awakened, which probably stimulated an urge to give the new images a try (thus letting the genie out of the bottle). It must have been fascinating to observe how painters incorporated a camera image into the process of painting. When you see the photos those earlier artists had to work with along with the resulting paintings, it is obvious how great a factor their drawing and painting skills were in gleaned what they did from such sparse information.

Finally, it is also important to note that many, but certainly not all, of the paintings resulting from those photos were rendered as much as was possible to look as if they were done from life. This is particularly true of the Masters of Direct Painting, such as Sargent and Zorn. However, as far as I know, Sargent made minimal use of photos as aids in a few of his landscape studies. Zorn, on the other hand, used monochrome photo prints for a number of his etchings and watercolors, demonstrating again the role of skill and long experience in working from life. I have often wondered too if Zorn's actual reasons in using photos for certain etchings and paintings might have been simple compassion. After all, many of the naked ladies who posed for him did so up to their hips in the icy waters of a Swedish lake. That, however, does not explain the other works from photos done indoors.

WHY HAS RELIANCE ON PHOTOGRAPHY BEEN CALLED A CRUTCH?

Because sometimes it really *is* like a crutch, but only literally so when it is used as a *substitute* for a basic skill, or to avoid an *essential* effort. The word crutch may be unfortunate because it can sound as if it were a judgment upon artists who use photos. It suggests they might be lazy or somehow lacking in talent. Implications such as those are both presumptuous and unfair. Photos are a godsend for those who do not have the opportunity to work from life, or who were not as lucky as I was to do life studies from my beginnings under a master of direct painting.

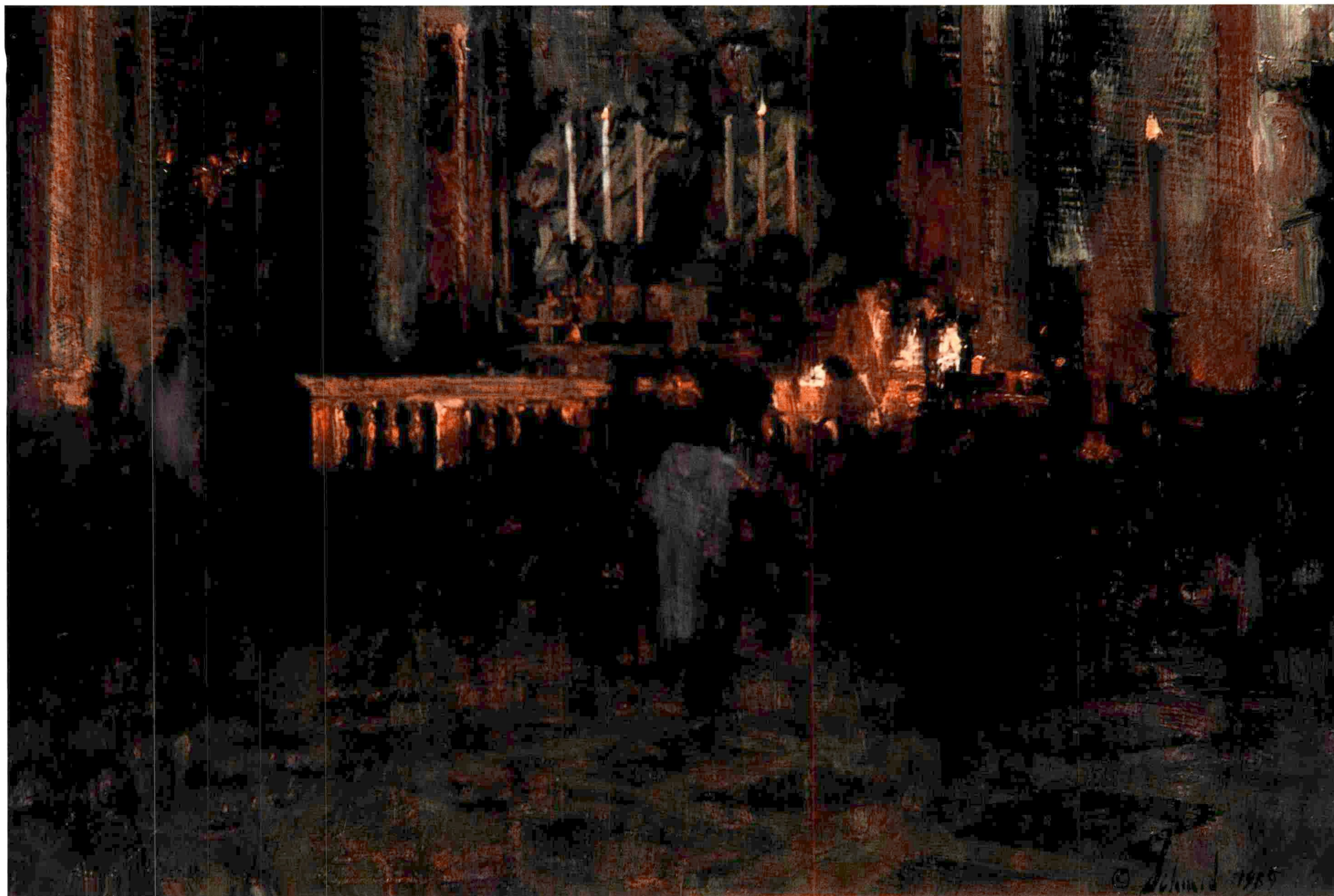
Photos can bring a world of subject matter to the disabled, like my artist friend, Marcus Thomas, who was left without the use of his arms, hands, and legs, from a tragic accident in 1986. Not a man to just give in, Marcus taught himself to draw and paint with a brush held in his teeth. Today, he makes a living painting from his wheelchair (actually an ingenious studio on wheels). He describes his use of photos as a partnership between those images and his imagination. In his new book, *FLIGHT OF THE MIND—A Painter's Journey Through Paralysis* (2012), Marcus speaks over and over of endless possibilities awaiting an invitation into our lives (amazing for a guy who can *only* move his head, and one shoulder). As he says, "If your mind becomes bored with your heart, you are defeated."

Norman Rockwell, who was not handicapped, commented about his own well-known extensive use of photos by pointing to his early academic training in painting and drawing as a necessity in working with them. He too emphasized the vital importance of combining photos with competent drawing and creative ideas. Clearly then, in combination with an artist's technical savvy, the camera and the many other graphic aids are undeniably useful. Therefore, since the reality of photography's ubiquity is with us to stay, we should at least look at what it is, what it is not, and how best to handle it in a balanced way. Here are some pros and cons.

THE PROS:

1. Photos are often the only way we can have access to certain subjects. Even though it is a comparatively limited access, it is better than none at all. It allows us access to subjects impossible to paint from life—a posthumous portrait, such as *Mavoureen* on page 88, is an obvious example. (We can't bring the dead back to life and have them sit for us, at least not yet.) Insufficient painting time also prevents painting from life. There are subjects which move too fast—children, sports, animals, etc. Other subjects exist as very brief visual effects. Often we would like to paint a certain subject, but there is no vantage point from which to set up and paint. Other circumstances, such as traffic, private property issues, terrain, wild animals, and so on, make it impossible to set up our painting equipment.

The two paintings I did inside Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome (*The Altar*, page 177, and opposite, *Communion*, page 283), are good examples. The use of cameras inside that holy place is strictly forbidden. However, I managed to shoot several rolls of 120 film, using a bulky Hasselblad under my jacket, without the guards noticing, or myself being struck by lightning from above. (I felt the Lord forgave me, seeing as how I was an altar boy at Saint Hilary's for three years.) A camera brings those otherwise inaccessible subjects within our reach.



COMMUNION oil on panel, 8 x 12, St. Peter's Basilica, The Vatican, Rome, 1969

This small color sketch is the same altar in St. Peter's Basilica as in the larger watercolor painting on page 177. This version is closer to the darker lighting in St. Peter's when I was doing my photography there. My decision to make the watercolor lighter was mostly based on the fact that watercolor shows up best when the majority of the picture area is not extremely dark (as it was in my photograph). Watercolor dries flat, which is not a problem in the light and middle tones. Oil paint is a far better choice for pictures with lots of darks because of the nature of oil paint to respond well with deeply transparent darks.

2. There are a great number of artists in this world with special needs. For most of them, painting from life is not realistically possible or even desirable. For the latter, photos or any other images for that matter, are merely references in producing various types of art which are realistic in an interpretive way rather than representational as Rembrandt's or Nancy Guzik's are. Many others are people who are just plain shy about painting in public, or whose natural painting speed, or other routines such as raising little kids or earning a living will not allow it. And of course as I mentioned earlier, there are the physically handicapped, but also those confined by medical conditions which rule out the demands of working from life as they might wish to. And then there are the incarcerated. I have had many letters over the years from individuals in prison who are allowed to paint. All of these and a great many others could never experience the joys of creating art at all without the use of photography.

3. Photos for me are like a security blanket. I take several bracketed shots before starting a painting in case my model suddenly drops dead, or an earthquake suddenly destroys the landscape I have started. Seriously, there are countless reasons why a painting attempt can be interrupted or terminated before completion. Photos are also a fast and convenient way to record subjects to be painted later, and they can also act as a supplement to working from life. Often when I paint with my friends, I become so involved in teaching I neglect to finish my own sketch, so completing it later from a photo is usually the only option. It is certainly better than memory at my age (uncomfortably close to 80).

When I know I am unable to complete a work in one session, I make color notes, brushstrokes of colors, in the unfinished areas of my painting where I know it is unlikely my photo can accurately capture the very light and dark tones. In addition, a photo is handy as a reference for touch-up work, and other details for corrections. They are far better than just trying to remember. Neither of the choices, memory or photography, are perfect, but they do beat guesswork or faking it. Depending on the sophistication of your camera, and your lens settings, a digital photograph can now provide as much detail as film did. Ironically, that very over-abundance of detail is one of the problems photos present, because it is much more detail than we humans see or need.

4. I find photos are useful for gathering ideas and details I'd like to paint later from life, or as informational sources I can use in the same way as a quick sketch. I'll never know how many scenes I saw while walking in New York, or viewed outside my window, or seen after a snowfall, and never bothered to take a quick photo as a reminder to go back and do a painting. I must have thousands of those incomplete memories—actually mere impressions now.

5. Photos have been invaluable as well as references to verify or rectify ornamental features I painted loosely from life. For example, when I painted *Abbotsford*, the historic manor house of Sir Walter Scott in Scotland last year (in the pouring rain), I took numerous close-up photos of distinctive motifs and figurations, such as stonework, carvings, stained glass, stone tracery, ironwork, and tiles. Since I painted the overall structure from a distance of about ninety yards from the main turrets (and not having the best eyesight), I needed the information in those close-ups to ensure architectural fidelity.

6. Every so often when I decide to make changes in a painting, I do them on a digital photo of my work on a computer monitor. It's so much better than the days of using tracing paper, photostats, and acetate or plastic wrap overlays. I can take a picture of my sketch or larger work in question, download it to my computer, and I'm ready to play. I can experiment endlessly with corrections and adjustments to the computer image without ever touching the painting itself—not until I see on the monitor *exactly what changes* I wish to make. Before computers, amending artwork, particularly oil paintings could be risky business. Unless I knew *precisely what changes* to make, and more importantly, exactly *how* to make them, I could very easily make things worse, or wreck the whole painting in the process of trying this and that speculatively.

NANCY AND THE SWANS (right)
oil on canvas, 36 x 24, Wales, 2000

The need for good photos coupled with experience in painting from life is clear in these two images. WOOD IBIS (below) called for judgments in creating images to express movement.

NANCY AND THE SWANS was a very complicated painting in which I selected from a dozen or so photos of the swans to group them in an interesting way. I also altered the atmospheric mood of the painting. Here it is obvious I could never have created the very authentic look I wanted without having had years of experience painting identical situations from life.



WOOD IBIS (above) charcoal and pastel on paper
18.5 x 14.5 (Detail), Everglades, Florida, 1970





CARRIAGES AT THE PLAZA oil on canvas, 20 x 26, Manhattan, 1987

7. In working with digital photos, I use *Photoshop*, the professional imaging program. With it I can see my painting enlarged, reduced, reversed, upside down, distorted, lighter, darker, in other color variations, and almost any other changes I could dream up. I can do all of that to my entire painting's image, or to just one pixel. If you are not familiar with Photoshop or another imaging program, you can still use computer features such as *View* and *Tools* and *Crop* when you bring a photo to your monitor. They will perform most of the zooms, sizing, reversals, color changes, brightness, and so on as the professional imaging systems. It is a good idea too when working with images strictly for making painting changes, to have the resolution at a moderate level (100–150dpi). Very high resolutions create large files and slow down the imaging response. Save the high resolution photos (400–2000dpi) for your archives on DVDs or external drives. And oh yes, make a habit of working on a duplicate of your photo. Keep the original shot untouched just in case.

IMPORTANT NOTE

Please bear in mind as you read what follows below in CONS, that my comments stem from my personal conviction that the word *ART* encompasses a vast range of art forms, each with its levels of difficulty, and magnitudes of achievement. In the same way chess is certainly a greater challenge than tic-tac-toe, so too painting from life demands more and rewards more. In the kind of *bravura* painting I have been describing in this book, the challenge lies in the skills I can bring to bear in meeting the difficulties and depth of ideas in my primary subject matters. I truly believe that for myself, the greatest technical and artistic test is painting real life as it is happening. When I feel I have been successful, I regard what I have done as belonging in a class by itself, unmatched, because I have experienced and captured a genuine human experience. I can't imagine anything else being quite the same.

THE CONS:

1. When using photos as the primary (or only) source of subject matter, it is vital to remember cameras are recording devices, not experiencing devices. A photo is the product of a machine which simply makes an impassive visual record according to how it is set, of whatever it has been designed to record of whatever it is pointed at. Unlike us, it does not think or feel, and therefore cannot record the way you or I see a subject. No camera was ever terrified while snapping a shot of an oncoming train, or ducked bullets in combat, and no camera was ever in love with the person whose picture it took. Cameras do not get emotionally involved, do not have attitudes, philosophies, or opinions, and they don't get angry when their pictures don't turn out. They are technically smart, but life-dumb instruments. They feel nothing, and have no understanding of what they record.

2. Wonderful pictures can be painted solely from photos, but they will not be the same as working from the real thing. Why? Because photographs cannot capture the countless other stimuli experienced in painting from life—the camaraderie of working in a group, the living presence of a model, the myriad sounds and sensations of the outdoors or the mood of studio light, the pressures of time and shifting conditions, and my own sweaty excitement in capturing what is happening. In the beginning there were many disappointments in learning to paint life, but in time, as I learned from my mistakes, my results became satisfactions. After that they became far deeper experiences.

I never dismiss the powerful effect of my environment, my personal state, or the intimate reciprocity between myself and my subject. All of those forces and more, combined with my skills, literally dictate the way I paint from life, and it is never the same from one time to the next. This way of creating art is never predictable. Sometimes it is a struggle, other times a joyride. Whatever the case, it is always a sink-or-swim situation, and never boring. Because of this, the results of working from life are, for better or worse, at least evidence of a real personal experience. At best, using a photo as the only source for a painting is a second-hand substitute for a human experience, and can only be supplemented with memory and guesswork.

3. Cameras do not give a true *technical* picture of what you and I see, at least not yet. They never will until the operational chips in cameras are made to have psychic capabilities which can read our minds and then select from the plethora of information in a subject only the elements we experience, and only in the ways we experience them. Today's cameras are engineering marvels indeed, but they only record what they are designed by manufacturers to record, and that is both qualitatively and quantitatively different from what we humans can record with our eyes and minds. Except for capturing detail, which they are good at (better than we are), cameras are remarkably limited. The sensitivity of both photographic film and electronic sensors is trifling compared to our human sensitivity. The color and value latitude of film and sensors are only a tiny fraction of what our eye-mind team sees. The equivalent drawbacks and limitations exist with digital scanning devices.

Above a certain lightness everything in a photo is washed-out white. Below a given darkness it is all the same unidentifiable color (which is one reason why photos disappoint us). "Bracketing" helps (taking several different exposures of the same shot), but even then, we can never see the extremes of brightness or darkness in their true colors and values *simultaneously*. There is also the frustrating fact that no matter how sophisticated our equipment or photographic skill, we never know exactly what we will or will not capture at the moment we trip the shutter.

Working from digital images (TV and computer monitors) is all the rage now. They are more accurate to work from than printed photos, because the colors and values, though far from perfect, are at least better. They are more fun too because the pictures can be manipulated with graphic imaging programs in helpful and entertaining ways. However, digital monitors, whether the big screen in your living room, or the cell phone in your pocket, are limited in respect to colors and values in their own way just as film or digital cameras are. For example, beyond a given light value the screen simply goes all white, and there is no true black unless the TV set or monitor is switched off completely in a completely darkened room.

At a recent seminar on this subject, the Master painter, Dan Gerhartz, correctly observed that painting from life is much easier than painting from photos, because you don't have to fake anything.

4. If your experience is like mine, or those I paint with, you have probably had admiring friends compliment your painting by saying how very real it looks. *"It's just like a photograph,"* they will say. Dear Lord, I never had the heart to tell them as far as I was concerned, equating my painting with a photo is probably the *worst* choice of words they could have made. Every artist to whom I have mentioned this agrees with me. When our efforts are characterized, however naively, as being photographic, it is always a bit irksome. I suspect the reason lies in the fact that serious painters have traditionally been viewed as fortunate individuals endowed with creative abilities, such as knowing how to draw, which most other humans do not enjoy. *"I can't even draw a straight line,"* is the familiar and slightly sad phrase. Well I'm not so good at doing straight lines either, but I do try very hard indeed to make my paintings touch others as no photograph ever could.

I admit I'm old-fashioned (and old), but having a passion for great art is old-fashioned too, and by no means reserved for the young. Falling in love is hardly modern (thank you, Shakespeare), or helping others, or just being a decent human being (read the Roman Stoic philosophers). All of our most cherished values are old-fashioned because they were refined out of generations of human experience. So there is a certain well-deserved and healthy pride in belonging to a timeless fraternity of painters distinguished for their highly developed skills, rather than merely how photographically realistic images can be made to look. As I pointed out earlier in this book and elsewhere, with the kind of painting we are dealing with here, *the way things look* is just the beginning. It is the first door of many others opening in welcome.



MOUNTAIN PHEASANT (Immature), oil on canvas, 12 x 16, 1995

5. Paintings done from photos are easily recognized as such. Often they appear to be very tightly detailed renderings. This is because most cameras focus sharply unless set otherwise, which means the images artists must use will have lots of details. Also, the entire area of a photo will generally show detail in focus, whereas our eyes, as described earlier, focus only within the small center of sight called the macula. We cannot focus in the peripheral areas of our vision.

Another telltale marker is that the subject or an aspect of it could not *possibly* have been done from life. (It doesn't take a genius to see that a deer leaping in midair, with each hair on its body precisely rendered, could not possibly have been posed.) Too much detail is also a giveaway because painting from life will not allow it. (Deer cannot fly yet, nor hover like a helicopter.) Other tip-offs are a characteristic lack of selectivity—painting everything, including the deficiencies in a photo (such as overexposure and a lack of color in the darks).

On the other hand, an overabundance of detail is not necessarily a handicap, at least not with some buyers of art. For them it is an express requirement. Many collectors prefer photographic-looking, highly detailed pictures, particularly those who collect authentic renditions of specific subject matter. For example, while paintings of the American West have always been popular, some collectors buy only certain categories of that genre. Typical examples are: Cowboys on horses, Cattle stampedes, Cowboys in yellow slickers, Indians in a wide variety of situations and dress, Rodeos, the U.S. Cavalry, the Old chuck wagon, Roping a calf, etc. Less common are Cowgirls or the pioneer wife behind a plow.

Similar practices of collecting by category are seen with aviation art, military and war stuff, vintage automobiles, old sailing ships, rainy street scenes of Paris, pinup girls, champion dogs and cats or horses, and so on. In most cases, the collector and artist (or artists) form a kind of symbiotic relationship where both parties share an interest in say, football, where one paints pictures of memorable touchdowns or players at a bloody moment of impact, and the other guy buys the pictures. This almost limitless demand tends to encourage the use of photos because the market, however naive, is very lucrative. In many cases the only sources to work from are photos. I believe what I have described above is more about satisfying patrons than it is about art—that is, if art is seen as a deeply realized act of self expression transcending subject matter.

THE REALLY BIG SIN

Some say you will know for certain you have truly hit bottom the day you project a photo onto a canvas or sheet of watercolor paper and—dare I even say the words—**TRACE IT**. (And here I am not referring to the various methods of simply transferring original freehand drawings from paper to canvas.) I mean this: it's when you take a photo of your mom, your puppy, the Taj Mahal, or whatever, then put the photo into a projector, lower the lights, put a canvas on your easel, project the photo onto the canvas, and then patiently *trace everything* onto your canvas down to the last tiny detail. And you do all of this with the full knowledge that most people viewing the finished piece will assume it was drawn freehand in the usual way.

I know the very thought of doing such things has probably never even occurred to you, but if the temptation ever rears its ugly head, resist it to the death! Why? Because direct tracing of your primary subject matter is like sitting down at an electronic piano, pushing the start button, and pretending you are the one doing the playing. It is throwing a frozen dinner in the microwave and assuming you are a skilled chef. It is painting by the numbers, but without the numbers.

It is amazing how we can delude ourselves about reality using rationalization and other mental expedients to justify our behavior—the human capacity for self-deception is breathtaking. You might dazzle a layman for a while, even some of your fellow artists, but you cannot fool yourself entirely any more than you can hide from God. Of course, if you're painting to make money, it doesn't matter. In that case the goal is profit, not art, so anything goes.



SUMATRAN TIGER watercolor on paper, 8 x 12, 1970

I was going to call this one "Roar," but I thought better of it. Actually he was yawning, perhaps out of sheer boredom, I'll never know. I drew many of these animals at the Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago, during my student days. I wanted to be able to do animals as well as people, so I made many trips to the Natural History Museum and the two zoos in the Chicago area. Doing a watercolor or an oil painting of a live animal from life is risky. Even if they are sleeping, you never know when they are going to get up and walk around. Doing my drawings from life, and paintings from my photos was the ideal way to go. Besides learning their anatomy, I also learned animal motion from my life drawings.



NANCY oil on canvas, 20 x 16, 1991

I wasn't consciously thinking about Vermeer when I was setting up Nancy in this pose, but there it is! The similarities are undeniable—the plain wall, the fabrics, the strong side light from a window (although Vermeer's light, with one or two exceptions, always came from a higher angle and the opposite direction).

For all of its obviously similar design elements, however, there are several striking dissimilarities in my painting.

For example, Vermeer would never have cut his picture in half as I did here, the bottom half dark, the top half, light. Nor would he have employed my loose edges, impasto painting, or palette knife work.

Still, Vermeer's influence seems to have come through. I guess it is the result of how I absorb the things I like in works of other painters. I take what I value in them, reject the rest, and make them part of my own repertoire.

My mind is a supermarket of other artists' techniques and ideas. My mind is filled with Rembrandt faces, Sargent brushstrokes, Zorn edges, Sorolla's color, Mancini's romanticism, Serov's haunting honesty, and so much more.

If I never had a single original thought in my own head, I could still come up with endless composites of their works and make them look uniquely my own. It doesn't happen that way, of course, because I have an irresistible drive to put my own spin on things. For better or worse, I always see things in the Masters' works that I am compelled to do differently.

If you do it too much (tracing), it is likely to erode what drawing ability you do have. Tracing seems effortless, though quite tedious, compared to freehand drawing, but it can easily become a dependent habit. The **rendering** of a traced image, however, can be anything but effortless because of an ever-increasing reliance on the traced lines, and the consequent imperative to preserve them. This, in turn, leads to difficulties in creating interesting edges.

When you finish a painting started as a tracing, there can be little sense of achievement, except perhaps for the patience required to color it. Tracing can be degrading because you deny yourself the freedom to use your own powers of self-expression. Real drawing is a discipline that must be maintained by constant practice. **Use it or lose it** was never more true than it is here. It is like staying in physical shape, but in most cases you will not need a shower afterwards. Knowing **how** to do it must be accompanied by actually doing it as a first choice. The habit of tracing to get the drawing reduces you to the level of a child playing with a coloring book, and it's not as much fun as it was when you were three years old.

I suppose it can be argued that in the same way a calculator is used to bypass the tedium of arithmetic, a traced photograph can replace freehand drawing. Norman Rockwell, again, commenting on his practice of tracing photos, pointed out how today we don't use horses and buggies when we can drive a car. I thought about that, and while I have no problem with the part about driving a car, I do feel it a bit specious to equate horse and buggy technology with virtuoso drawing ability. I wonder as well about the deliberate dismissal of a valuable human skill in favor of a labor-saving device, however convenient it might be.

From time immemorial, the one skill distinguishing artists from all others is the ability to draw. It is an overriding part of our personal identity as artists, and it is how others see us.

HOW I USE PHOTOS

I use them in situations I outlined previously in describing the "Pros." However, I painted exclusively from life for over 20 years before a physical disability limited my ability to carry equipment around for landscape painting. For a while until my recovery, a camera was the only means I had of reaching certain outdoor subjects. I know for certain that my considerable experience with *plein air* painting enabled me to avoid many of the problems of working with photos.

Two things are on my mind when I must use a photograph. First, I want my finished painting to look as much as possible as if it were done from life. That is my highest priority. Second, I am always aware of how much better it would be if I **really were** painting from life instead. With that in mind, here are some other points:

1. ***I regard a photograph as a tool, and only a tool***—not as a more convenient way to draw. I enjoy being in complete control, unrestricted by what the camera happened to capture, and definitely not as a primary source of subject matter. I use photography as a supplement to, not a substitute for, the real thing.

2. ***I never do anything from a photo I haven't previously encountered in a similar painting from life***. Nor have I ever done a painting from another's photo. Once, I confess, I did do a small drawing someone else took of a young girl and her dog. Mea culpa. If I must use a photo, most often I first do a small painting from life in order to get the color, values, and edges of the actual subject. I then do a larger version in my studio using a photo as reference for drawing and detail. The larger painting is always worse, and I feel stupid.

3. In the past, I used larger format film, 120 (60mm) instead of 35mm, because it provided far more information (3 1/2 times more) when enlarged. The Hasselblad camera I still use is cumbersome compared to 35mm cameras, but it is worth the trouble for subjects where color changes are critical. When it comes to using a selected photo, I create a digital image of it in a high-resolution scanner for viewing on a color balanced high-definition monitor, about 21 inches measured diagonally.

Today I also use a high-resolution digital 35mm camera for ordinary quick shots, such as landscape features and passing ideas for pictures, much as a writer will dictate to a pocket recorder when useful thoughts arise. If I know beforehand I will have to supplement a painting, and my subject is a person, I restrict the size of my depiction in the painting to no more than one-third life size. As far as I am concerned, no photo at this writing, regardless of size, will show sufficient color changes for a larger, life-size rendering. Current digital resolutions will surely increase as technology advances. For now, I settle for dipping into my knowledge and experience, or failing that, simply guess at the color (fake it).

Technology being what it is, the equipment I mention here will probably be obsolete by industry standards by the time this book is printed and made available. No matter. Today's cameras and other devices are well-enough developed to give me what I need for the next five or seven years or so. In the future, technicians will have changed the connecting cables, outlets, software, and other stuff, so my hardware, though still perfectly good, will be incompatible with anything new, which will mean buying a whole new system. By then I might very well be completely obsolete, or I might be sipping margaritas while cruising the Greek Isles on my yacht.

4. As I mentioned earlier, I view my photos on a computer monitor to be sure of getting the most accurate color temperature as the equipment will allow. A computer monitor, or its equivalent in smaller devices, and digital projectors, will display photos shot in cool light as faithfully as those shot in warm light. In 2007 I produced a DVD showing how I use digital means in my painting. I made a 150 minute presentation because I realized most artists will sooner or later use photos, so they ought to see at least one good way that works for me (I'm sure there are others as well).

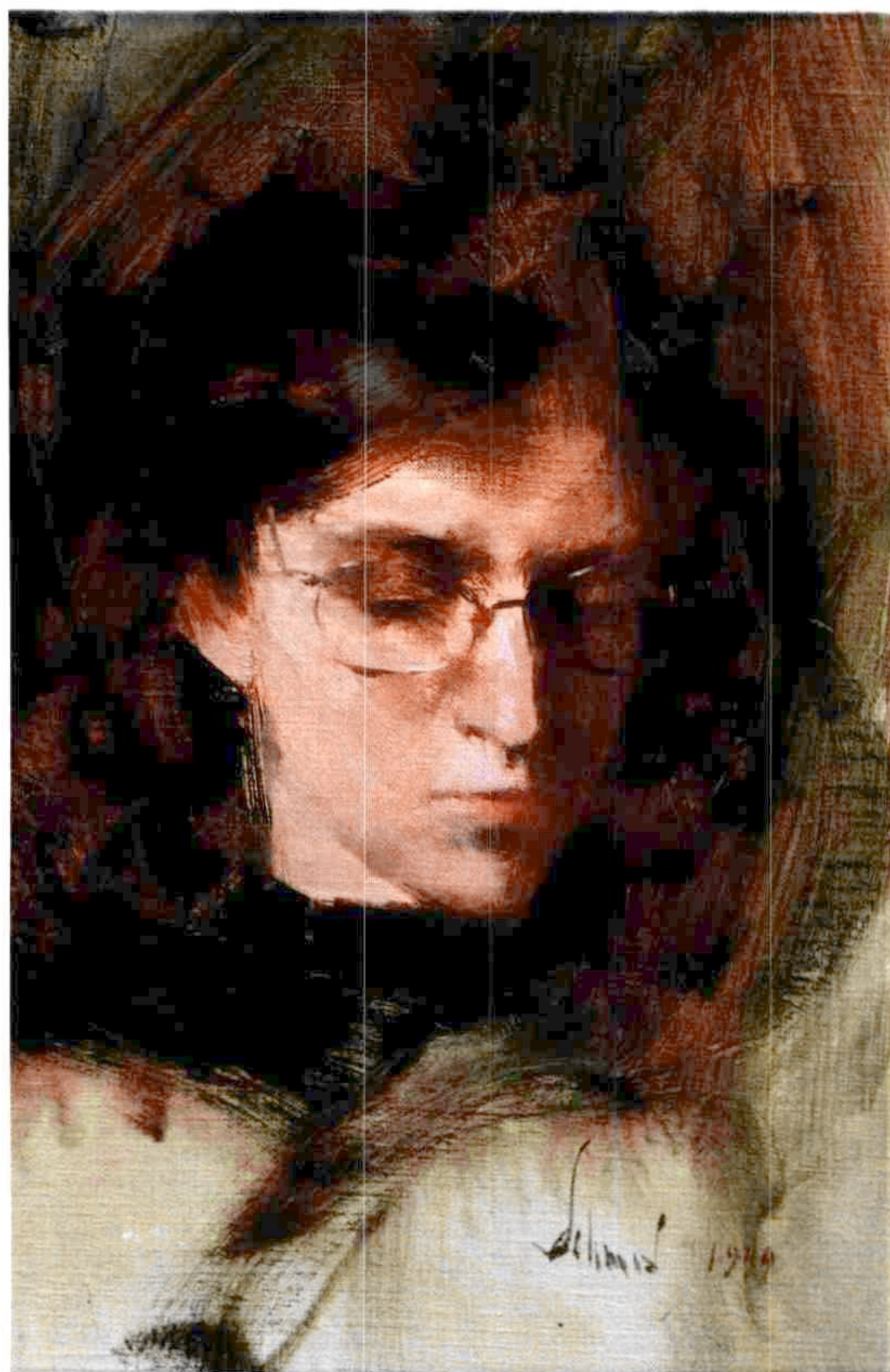
You can get this DVD (titled *White Pine*) through my website: www.richardschmid.com

5. To ensure my picture will have a look similar to *Alla Prima*, I try to set the same time restrictions as if I were actually painting from life. That way I will be forced to use the technique, the brushwork, drawing style, and degree of detail which would normally result from working under time pressure. It takes a bit of self-discipline, but yields a far more satisfying result (at least for me).

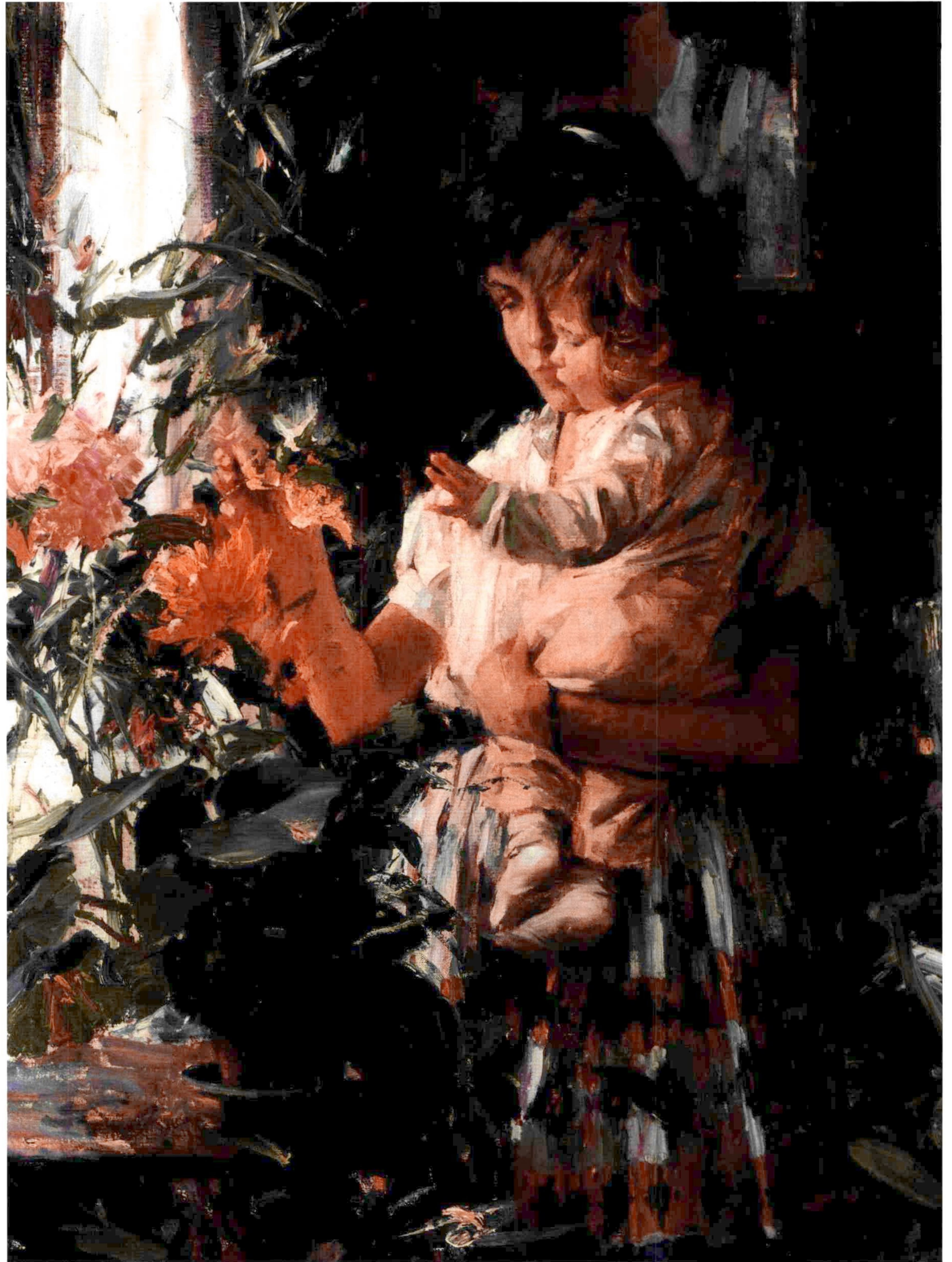
So it's good to be careful when using a photo. Look at it closely for areas of washed-out color and confusing detail. For example, photos taken in bright sunlight cannot capture true contrast and color simultaneously. Cameras yield the best color under *moderate* light conditions. When you work with a camera, try to imagine the image in the viewer as a painting. Before you trip the shutter, scan the subject for things in it, or things lacking, which might present later problems in painting. Also, be extravagant with your shots. Bracket them (three shots—one slightly overexposed, one correct, and one slightly underexposed). There is an automatic setting for bracketing on most professional 35mm cameras. Shoot from many angles too. Gather as much information as you can for a painting, but avoid using other peoples' photos. You need your own experience of the real thing to give an authentic look to your painting.

Use your photos as soon as possible after you take them so your memory of the subject is fresh. Be especially aware of edges when you paint because they are not as easily identified as they are in real life, especially those on the periphery. Paint your colors slightly brighter and dark values a bit deeper to make up for the film's inherent weakness. Eliminate unnecessary detail whenever you can.

Lastly, if you are dependent upon the use of photos for your way of earning a living from art, try to counterbalance the negative effects they have on your basic skill by setting aside regular time for painting from life. Join a painting group or do it on your own to make sure you maintain your "eye" for painting the real thing. It will enhance your work from photos immeasurably, and I think it's more interesting. Also you can meet a lot of, shall I say, eclectic, people in a roomful of artists.



JAN monochrome oil wash, 1985
BETTINA oil on canvas, 1999



JAN AND BETTINA (At one year), oil on canvas, 40 x 30, 1964



GEISHA (Puccini's Dream) oil on canvas, 16 x 20, 2011

CHAPTER THIRTEEN—THE MAGIC

A PERSONAL VIEW

I have been a painter for my entire adult life. In all of that time I have never been able to ignore the wonders possible in painting. The astonishing thing to me is how certain individuals could even conceive of anything as beautiful as some of their works—or how you and I could have the capacity to respond to them.

I have pursued this question relentlessly over the years, and I am still consumed with the mystery of what makes such magic possible. In my younger days, I learned what many serious thinkers thought about Art, and for a while I even believed I knew what it was. Inevitably it dawned on me I probably could not rationally understand Art itself. I know perhaps it is best left a mystery lest it lose its flavor, but as the matter stands, I am not wholly resigned to being in the dark forever. There is something in me that wants to keep picking away at the question of Art, because it still amazes me I cannot clearly define the work which has so dominated my life. Conundrums such as this are what windmills were to Don Quixote. Though I don't expect to nail it very soon, the questions surrounding Art remain wonderfully seductive. They are firmly bound to my identity, my values, my relationships with others, and my idea of what the world is.

While I am painting, however, such theoretical ideas rarely surface. I never wonder if my work is important (whatever that means), or if I should be better occupied. Any doubts I may have about the significance of what I am doing are little more than trivial irritations. Marvelous speculations sometimes come rushing to the surface during my sweaty efforts at creation, but they are never about aesthetics or the nature of Art.

Instead, my painting draws me into what has captivated me. Sometimes when concentration is intense, my canvas seems to take on an irresistible momentum, unfolding almost as if it had a life of its own, and I become lost in the spectacle of what is occurring. It is like the moment when a runner reaches his or her stride, and running becomes effortless, like flying. Those are heady moments indeed, times to be savored. They are always a dramatic reminder to me that skill is only one of the prerequisites—part of the setup to unleash a poetic act—and my painting, with all of its involvement and complication, seems merely a record of the event.

Of course, there is more to this business than what happens during painting. In my student days I was introduced to the ideas of Robert Henri, perhaps the most revered and influential of American painters. In *The Art Spirit* (Margery Ryerson. Harper & Row), he made one point over and over again—that Art can be a powerful voice for anything, and that artists should be the people who give voice to the unnoticed adventure underlying the routine of daily life. He urged us toward the Socratic maxim *know thyself* as the starting point. Henri believed Art was the means to jolt ourselves and others awake to the wonder of being alive in this stupendous universe. Over and over he pleads with us to seek technical excellence so we may give compelling expression to our thoughts.



ANGEL oil on canvas, 17 x 13, 2004

Time has not diminished my fascination with Henri's ideas nor those of the other heroes of my youth: Whitman, Emerson, Thoreau, and others. Their collective philosophy flashed as a thrilling verification of the direction in Art I craved, and though it may sound naive for a man of my age, I still respond to those ideas.

SUBJECT MATTER

Many people gravitate toward Art because it is still an arena of great freedom—almost any human act imaginable is now presented as Art today—but no creative effort can endure unless it touches us in a way we cannot forget. If you wish to do that with your paintings, you must do what is necessary to paint them well. Awareness and deep response are the beginning of any poetic act, but they are common human experiences, not exclusively artistic, and many have them. What sets you as an artist apart from the rest of humanity is your ability to give *visual form* to an idea—the skill to transform it into something more than an insight or perception alone. Art happens in the process of this unique transformation. You must be able to grab your viewer's attention and hold it while you get your message across.

If what you choose to paint comes from your heart, and you are skillful enough, it will resonate somehow within someone else. It is absurd to imagine that the magnitude of a work is somehow connected to the accepted importance of its subject (or the artist). The portrait Velasquez did of his manservant surpasses those he did of the Pope or the King of Spain. Degas found his vision in simple ballet students, not prima ballerinas. Monet caught it with lily pads and hay; Lautrec saw angels in prostitutes; Vermeer painted the corner of his room. Rembrandt dignified all of humanity by painting his own worn face; Bach offered us his beautiful abiding love of God, and uncountable thousands of completely anonymous artists gave us their workaday craftsmanship—things that are now the treasures of antiquity.

Always remember dear friend, that seen from a certain point of view, everything is miraculous, and it is everywhere. Therefore, nothing is out of bounds as subject matter, even the dark side of life. That is why the face masks of Tragedy and Comedy are symbols of Drama, and why Poetry and Music can be so bittersweet. The grandest and simplest things contain worlds within worlds. Seeing them is a matter of your point of view, and your painter's eye is a special portal to such sights.

When choosing your subjects, never worry about greatness or significance or your place in history. Let your subject come from within you and be an honest act of sharing. In a very real sense, every work you do is a self-portrait because your paintings always reveal more about *you* than about your subject. Your experience of something, not the something itself, is the true underlying subject of every work you do. Ultimately, that is how your work, or that of any other artist, will be judged.



NANCY PAINTING oil on panel, 12 x 16, 1988

YOU

You are the sum of your choices. Your job then is to make sure your ideas about what to paint are not wholly based upon either the acceptable or the taboo, but arise instead from what honestly fascinates and stirs you. You may feel vulnerable, but I see no way around that. I assure you it is OK to feel vulnerable. It is, after all, the human condition. In any case, your thoughts (and mine) are just as valid as those of anyone else. Even though you share countless similarities with others, you are unique. No one has your mind or your feelings. They do not always notice what you notice, and do not have precisely the same sensitivities or fears. No one has the same idea of God as you. No one longs to embrace life or ponders death and beyond as you do. No one is human in the same exact way as you are.

Once you understand this, your task is to get in touch with yourself. Find out what moves you, what you believe in, and what you truly understand about life. Taken together, such insights may lead you to know who you are, and what this great experience of living means to you. Then put that in your paintings.

Somewhere within all of us there is a wordless center, a part of us that hopes to be immortal in some way, a part that has remained unchanged since we were children. It is the source of our strength and compassion. That faint confluence of the tangible and the spiritual is where Art comes from. It has no known limits, and once you tap into it you will realize what truly rich choices you have. May each painting you do from that sacred place include an expression of gratitude for the extraordinary privilege of being an artist.

*RICHARD and WOLF*

RECOMMENDED READING

SELECTIONS FROM MY LIBRARY

Below are some of the books which have greatly influenced me both technically and inspirationally.

INSTRUCTIONAL BOOKS

A Complete Guide to Drawing, Illustration, Cartooning and Painting (Rare)

by Gene Byrnes

© 1948 Gene Byrnes

Simon and Schuster, New York

A Dictionary of Art Terms and Techniques

by Ralph Mayer

© 1969 by Ralph Mayer

ISBN 0-690-23673-5

Alla Prima II: Companion - Richard Schmid's Materials, Tools, and Techniques

by Katie Swatland

© 2014 by Katie Swatland

ISBN 978-0-9778296-1-3 (Hardcover)

ISBN 978-0-9778296-2-0 (Softcover)

Anatomical Diagrams for the Use of Art Students (Rare)

by James M. Dunlop A.R.C.A.

© 1924 The Macmillan Company

ISBN-13: 978-0486457758

Animal Anatomy For Artist

by Eliot Goldfinger

© 2004 Eliot Goldfinger

ISBN 0-19-514214-4

Atlas of Human Anatomy for the Artist

by Stephen Rogers Peck

© 1951 by Oxford University Press, Inc.

ISBN 0-19-500052-8 (cloth)

ISBN 0-19-503095-8 (pbk.)

Carlson's Guide to Landscape Painting

by John F. Carlson

© 1953 by Sterling Publishing Co., Inc.

ISBN 0-486-22927-0

Drawing the Head and Hands

by Andrew Loomis

© 1956 Andrew Loomis

SBN 670-28385-1

Figure Drawing for All It's Worth

by Andrew Loomis

© 1943 Andrew Loomis

Human Anatomy for Artists

by Eliot Goldfinger

© 1991 by Eliot Goldfinger

ISBN 0-19-505206-4

The Artist's Guide to Selecting Colors

by Michael Wilcox

© 1997 The Wilcox Trust

ISBN 09587 891 8 5

The Artist's Handbook of Materials and Techniques

by Ralph Mayer

© 1970 by Ralph Mayer

ISBN 670-13665-4

The Human Figure (rare)

by J.H. Vanderpoel

© 1919 The Inland Printer Company, Chicago

Current edition:

© 1935 by Jessie H. Vanderpoel

ISBN-13: 978-0486204321

Sketching and Rendering in Pencil (Rare)
by Arthur L. Guptill
© 1922 The Pencil Points Press, Inc

The Language of Drawing
by Sherrie McGraw
© 2004 Sherrie McGraw
ISBN 0-9747074-3-0

The Art Spirit - Robert Henri
Compiled by Margery Ryerson
ISBN 0-465-00263-3

BOOKS ON ART

A Midsummer Night's Dream (Rare)
by William Shakespeare, Illustrations by Arthur Rackham
© Doubleday, Page & Company; 1st edition (1908)

American Impressionism
by William H. Gerds
© 1984 by Cross River Press, Ltd.
ISBN 0-89660-001-7

Against the Modern: Dagnan-Bouveret and the
Transformation of the Academic Tradition
by Gabriel P. Weisberg
© 2002 Dahesh Museum of Art
ISBN 0-8135-3155-1 (cloth: alk. paper)
ISBN 0-8135-3156-X (pbk.: alk. paper)

America's Great Illustrators
by Susan E. Meyer
© 1978 Harry N Abrams B. V., The Netherlands
ISBN 0-88365-645-0

Beyond Impressionism: The Naturalist Impulse
by Gabriel P. Weisberg
Text © 1992 Gabriel P. Weisberg
Illustrations © 1992 Harry N. Abrams, Inc.
ISBN 0-8109-1922-2

Glasgow Girls Women in Art and Design 1880-1920
by Jude Burkhauser
© 1990 by Canongate Publishing Limited
ISBN 0-86241-413-X
ISBN 0-9636985-0-8

Illustrating Modern Life: The Golden Age of American
Illustration
by Michael Zakian, Richard Kelly, David Apatoff
©2013 Frederick R. Weisman Museum of Art, Pepperdine
University
ISBN 978-1-882705-10-8

Russia, The Land, The People: Russian Painting 1850-
1910
©1986 Ministry of Culture of the Union of Soviet Socialist
Republic
ISBN 0-295-96439-1 (paper edition)
ISBN 0-295-96438-3 (cloth edition)

The Great Book of French Impressionism
by Diane Kelder
© 1925 and renewed 1953 by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc
ISBN 0-89659-151-4

The Red Rose Girls
by Alice A. Carter
© 2000 The Wonderland Press
ISBN 0-8109-9068-7 (pbk.)

BOOKS ON ARTISTS

Beaux, Cecilia
Cecilia Beaux: American Figure Painter
by Sylvia Yount
© 2007 the High Museum of Art, Atlanta
ISBN 978-0-520-25318-6

Brangwyn, Frank
The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam (Rare)
Illustrated by Frank Brangwyn
by T.N. Foulis Books

Frank Brangwyn and His Work (Rare)
by Walter Shaw-Sparrow
Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd
London

Dewing, Thomas Wilmer

The Art of Thomas Wilmer Dewing Beauty Reconfigured
by Susan A. Hobbs
© 1996 by The Brooklyn Museum
ISBN 1-56098-624-7 (cloth: alk.paper)
ISBN 1-56098-623-9 (paper: alk.paper)

Frantzen, Rose

Portrait of Maquoketa
by Rose Frantzen
© 2009 Rose Frantzen
ISBN 978-0-615-31815-8

Hornel, Edward Atkinson

Hornel: The Life and Work of Edward Atkinson Hornel
by Bill Smith
ISBN 1-873830-14-9 (Hardback)
ISBN 1-873830-19-X (Paperback)

Kley, Heinrich

The Drawings of Heinrich Kley
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ISBN-10: 0-486-20024-8

More Drawings by Heinrich Kley
by Dover Publications, Inc.
© 1962 by Dover Publications, Inc.
ISBN-10: 0486200418

Leyendecker, J.C.

J.C. Leyendecker: American Imagist
by Laurence S. Cutler, Judy Goffman Cutler
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ISBN 978-0-8109-9521-5

Llado, J. Torrents

J. Torrents Llado
by Torrents Llado
ISBN 978-84-612-4373-0

Mitchell, Dean

The Art of Dean Mitchell
by Dean Mitchell
© 1996 Dean Mitchell
ISBN 1-889741-07-8

Mancini, Antonio

Antonio Mancini Nineteenth-Century Italian Master
by Ulrich W. Hiesinger
© 2007 Philadelphia Museum of Art
ISBN 978-0-87633-255-9 (paper)
ISBN 978-0-87633-254-2 (cloth)
ISBN 978-0-300-12220-6 (Yale:cloth)

Antonio Mancini (Rare book)
by Saverio Kambo
© 1922 Istituto Italiano D'Arti Grafiche-Editore

Antonio Mancini en Nederland
(Catalog of Exhibition)
by Hanna Pennock
© 1987 Hanna Peccock, Utrecht
ISBN 90-70024-45-4

Monet, Claude

Claude Monet
by William C. Seitz
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 60-7800

Mucha, Alphonse

Alphonse Mucha
by Jiri Mucha
© Academy Editions 1071, 1974
ISBN 85676 1025

Alphonse Mucha The Complete Graphic Works
 edited by Ann Bridges
 © Academy Editions 1980
 ISBN 0-517-54189-0 HB
 ISBN 0-517-55308-2 PB

Pyle, Howard

Howard Pyle's Book of The American Spirit (Rare)
 by Howard Pyle
 Harper & Brothers
 ISBN 1125920343

Repin, Ilya

Ilya Repin
 by N. Vatenina, M. Karpenko
 © Editions d'art Aurora, Leningrad, 1985
 ISBN 5-7300-0165-7

Sargent, John Singer

John Singer Sargent
 by Carter Ratcliff
 © 1982 Cross River Press, Ltd.
 ISBN 0-89659-673-7

John Singer Sargent: Complete Paintings, Volume 1:
 The Early Portraits
 by Richard Ormond, Elaine Kilmurray
 © 1998 Yale University
 ISBN 0-300-07245-7

John Singer Sargent Drawings from the Corcoran Gallery
 by Edward J. Nygren
 © 1983 Smithsonian Institution and Corcoran Gallery
 ISBN 0-86528-019-3

John Singer Sargent: Figures and Landscapes 1874-1882
 by Richard Ormond, Elaine Kilmurray
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Sargent and Italy
 by Jane Dini, Richard Ormond, Bruce Robertson
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Sargent and the Sea
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The Watercolors of John Singer Sargent
 by Carl Little
 © 1998 Chameleon Books, Inc.
 ISBN 0-520-21970-8

Serov, Valentin

Valentin Serov
 by Grigory Arbuzov
 © 1987 Aurora Art Publishers, Leningrad
 Hardcover 271 pages

Valentin Serov (1865-1922)
 by The State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg
 Palace Editions 2005
 Hardcover 256 pages, 155 full color

Sorolla, Joaquín

Joaquin Sorolla
 Edited by Jose Luis Diez and Javier Baron
 Madrid 2009 Museo Nacional Del Prado

The Painter Joaquín Sorolla
 by Edmund Peel
 © 1989 Philip Wilson Publishers Ltd.
 ISBN 085667351X

Sorolla-Zorn
 by Museo Sorolla
 ISBN 84-7483-809-6

Thomas, Marcus C.

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Vuillard, Édouard

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by Belinda Thomson
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J.W. Waterhouse
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Wyeth, N. C.

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 71-168323

Zorn, Anders

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ISBN 91-971462-2-6

Anders Zorn

by Hans Henrik Brummer
© 1994 Sandler Mergel AB, Norstedts
ISBN 91-1-943482-0

Zorn Masterpieces

by Johan Cederlund
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Throughout his distinguished career as a painter, author, and teacher, Richard Schmid has been a candid spokesman for what is known as the *Grand Manner*—a certain mingling of virtuosity and unrestrained joy in art.

Richard holds a Doctorate in Fine Art, and since 1958, has presented 50 one-man shows. He currently lives in the hills of New Hampshire with his wife, the painter Nancy Guzik, and their two cats. Richard's work has been represented in the following:

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The National Academy of Sciences
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